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WAY OF THE RAT™

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猴
羊龍

The years of peace are at an end for the August Empire of Shinacea. From within, dark forces threaten the serenity of the Imperial City. From without, enemies from the steppes gather beyond the walls of civilization.

In these turbulent times, lost amidst events far larger than himself, lives a common thief of uncertain parentage named Boon Sai Hong. His home is the city of Zhumar, a walled fortress on the Empire's frontier.

The story of this humblest of lives would be as a single grain lost in a sandstorm but for a series of events that lead Boon to the possession of ancient objects with the power to change the world.

And so,
our tale begins...

Way of the Rat™ Vol. 1, Issue 1, JUNE 2002. FIRST PRINTING. Published by CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. Office of publication: 4023 Tampa Road, Suite 2400, Oldsmar, Florida 34677. **CrossGen®, CrossGen Comics®, CrossGeneration®, CrossGeneration Comics®,** and the **CrossGen sigil®** are registered trademarks of CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. **Way of the Rat™** and all prominent characters are ™ and © 2002 CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. All rights reserved. The entire contents of this book are ™ and © 2002 CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. The stories, incidents and characters in this publication are fictional. Any similarities to persons living or dead are purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reproduced in any form without the express written consent of CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. PRINTED IN CANADA.

"It is the wise man
who can discern
good fortune from ill."
Wing Tei Sun

THE FRONTIER CITY OF ZHUMAR, FAR TO THE WEST OF THE COMFORTS AND PLEASURES OF THE IMPERIAL COURT.

A FORTRESS BUILT HARD BY THE ENDLESS STEPPES.

HOME TO ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND HAPLESS SOULS WHO LIVE EACH DAY BENEATH THE SHADOW OF A TARTAR'S SWORD.

Hm. IT IS NOT *HERE* WHERE PROMISED.

ONLY *BOOKS.*

TOO LITTLE *MONEY* FOR THE WEIGHT.

Al...

GAH!

hunh. DEAD AS DUST.

AND WHAT IS THIS YOU WERE *READING* AT THE LAST, OLD MAN?

ugh.

A PICTURE OF ONE OF THE HELLS, I GUESS. SOMEONE SICK IN THE *BRAIN* PAINTED THIS.

BUT WITH ALL OF THIS IVORY AND GOLD INLAY IT WILL BE WORTH *SOME*THING.

HIDEOUS.

YOU'LL HAVE NO *NEED* OF THIS RING IN HELL.

NO AMOUNT OF GOLD WILL BUY YOU MERCY *THERE.*

Uh— TIGHT.

Uh?

...AND HE HAS TOLD NO ONE OF THESE DISCOVERIES?

FATHER TRUSTS NO ONE BUT YOURSELF.

THE RING IS A SOURCE OF GREAT *WORRY* TO HIM, PRINCESS ZHENG.

IT SHOULD BE IN THE HANDS OF A *WARRIOR* NOT A SCHOLAR, TEI SU.

信知

AND *MORE* SO THE BOOK. HE WOULD NOT TELL ME HOW HE CAME TO—

FATHER!

MURDERED. AND THE RING IS GONE.

BUT THERE IS NO MARK ON HIM. DEATH TOOK HIM WITHOUT STRUGGLE.

IT WAS NOT *DEATH* THAT TOOK YOUR FATHER, TEI.

IT WAS *FEAR*. LOOK AT HIS EYES.

Eh?

THEY HAVE GAZED INTO THE *HEART* OF HORROR.

Ai!

WHAT MIGHT HAVE FRIGHTENED HIM SO? HE WAS ALONE IN HIS LIBRARY WITH HIS BOOKS.

ALONE?

I AM NOT SO CERTAIN.

GHOSTS COME TO TAKE FATHER'S SPIRIT!

BEHIND ME, TEI!

THESE ARE BUT *MEN*

THEY BLEED AND THEY *DIE*

AND MANY WI... DO JUST THAT TONIGHT

HAVE THEY THE RING OF STAFFS?

THESE ARE NOT THIEVES

WERE THEY SUCH THEY WOULD HAVE LONG FLED

THERE IS *ANOTHER* HERE

HE IS OUR THIEF

GAH!

OW!

THIS DAMNED RING BURNS!

OOP!

HE HAS THE RING!

HE MUST DIE!

Ah!

IT STILL *BURNS!*

WELL *NOTHING* PUT THIS FIRE OUT?

Oh.

YA!!

"WHO IS THIS ONE?

HE IS NOT W TH THE SWORDSMEN

HE IS NOT SENT BY JUDGE XAIN

YET HE HAS STOLEN THE RING

AND THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS

YOU MUST *FOLLOW*, PRINCESS ZHENG! THEIR POWER IS TOO GREAT TO BE RELEASED UPON THE WORLD!

I CANNOT

PRINCESS! YOU ARE *WOUNDED!*

I WILL LIVE, TEI. SAVE YOUR GRIEF FOR YOUR *FATHER*

"I AM SURE OF WHERE THE BOOK AND RING WILL TURN UP"

THE WIND FROM THE EAST *DIES*, IT APPEARS.

LUCK IS NOT YOURS TONIGHT, MERCHANT FONG

THE TILES HAVE FAVORED ME *ALL* EVENING

IT IS NOT *FAIR!*

YOU ACCUSE A JUDGE APPOINTED BY THE IMPERIAL HOUSE OF *CHEATING?*

NO! I *MEANT* NO OFFENSE I ONLY CURSE THE GODS OF *CHANCE*, MOST EXALTED AND LEARNED JUDGE XAIN

YOU MUST ALLOW ME TO PLAY ONE *MORE* ROUND; TO SPARE MY HONOR

THE PRIZE YOU HAVE WON IS TOO *DEAR* TO LOSE

THE FIRST *LESSON* OF GAMBLING, MERCHANT FONG.

NEVER WAGER WHAT YOU CANNOT BEAR TO SACRIFICE

MERCY, HONORABLE XAIN!

MERCY!

I EXPECT DELIVERY TO MY HOUSE *BEFORE* DAWN.

. . TO *SPARE* YOUR *HONOR*'

I HATE A POOR LOSER. HE WOULD CROW LIKE A COCK HAD HE WON.

AS *REMOTE* A POSSIBILITY AS THAT WOULD BE

NOW HE CRIES FOR PITY WHEN FORTUNE TURNS ITS BACK.

MAY WE TURN NOW TO MORE *SERIOUS* MATTERS, XAIN?

NOTHING IS MORE SERIOUS THAN HONOR AND CHANCE, NUBOTAI

YOU HAVE PROMISED MY MASTER THE RING OF STAFFS. I HAVE BEEN HERE *THREE* DAYS AND MY HANDS ARE EMPTY

IT IS *WITHIN* MY GRASP I HOPE YOUR KHAN RECALLS *HIS* PROMISES AS WELL AS YOU DO *MINE*

THE DEAL YOU STRUCK WITH HIM IS *MEANINGLESS* WITHOUT THE RING TO SEAL IT

IT *WILL* BE HERE. I HAVE SENT MY BEST MEN TO RETRIEVE IT. ONLY THE LIFE OF A FEEBLE *BOOKWORM* STANDS IN MY WAY

SHOULD HE BE DISAPPOINTED, THE KHAN'S *WRATH* IS AS GREAT AS HIS GENEROSITY

I *TOLD* YOU

Eh?

AND?

VENERABLE JUSTICE - I HAVE COME FROM THE HOME OF THE SCHOLAR WING TEI

WE *FAILED* TO OBTAIN THE RING *PRINCESS ZHENG* WAS THERE AND -

AND A *THIEF* - HE STOLE THE RING AND ESCAPED

ZHENG MAI? THAT *WITCH?*

I WOULD DO *ANYTHING* TO EXPUNGE MY SHAME

DID YOU *HEAR* THAT, NUBOTAI?

I *DID*, JUDGE

A *MINOR* SETBACK. NOTHING TO CONCERN *US*.

I AM NOT CONCERNED.

YOUR VEILED THREATS GROW *TIRESOME*

I WILL *HAVE* THE RING BEFORE DAWN

NOW *LEAVE* ME. I MUST *FIND* THIS THIEF AND BRING THE *FULL* WEIGHT OF IMPERIAL LAW UPON HIS HEAD.

AS YOU *WISH*

A COMMON THIEF -

-- I WONDER IF HE *KNOWS* WHAT HE HAS CALLED DOWN UPON HIMSELF

Uh! Uh!

DAMN!

MUGGG

GET-- OFF!

WHY-- WON'T--IT-- MOVE?

COULD IT BE YOUR FAT PEASANT FINGERS AND NOT THE RING?

WHO SPEAKS?

STEP INTO THE LIGHT AND FACE ME!

I AM HERE, STUPID

HERE IN THE CAGE BENEATH THESE FILTHY DUCKS

AND PUT THAT *DAGGER* AWAY!

AAAH!!

AS YOU CAN SEE, I CAN'T *HURT* YOU

OOF!

IDIOT

THAT RING IS NO SILLY BAUBLE IT IS AN OBJECT OF *GREAT* POWER

I CANNOT HEAR A DEMON MONKEY SPEAKING TO ME YA YA

AND *YOU* -- THE GODS *ALONE* KNOW WHY WE WERE CHOSEN TO WEAR IT

STOP THAT *YAMMERING!*

THIS IS *IMPORTANT!*

GET ME OUT OF THIS CAGE BEFORE --

BOON SAI HONG THE FABLED JADE RAT

WONDERFUL *MORE* IDIOTS

HANA!

BOSS TIGER RECEIVES NO TRIBUTE HE SENT YOU FOR THE PHOENIX HEART AND YOU *VANISH*

THE BROTHERHOOD OF SCOUNDRELS *DEMANDS* PAYMENT

UNNH!

A FAILURE EVEN AS A THIEF

WHY *ME?*

YOU WILL PAY IN GOLD OR BLOOD, BOON NO MATTER TO *ME*

I HAVE HAD ILL LUCK THESE PAST NIGHTS THE HEART WAS NOT THERE ONLY AN UGLY SCROLL AND THIS RING

BUT I CAN'T *PRY* IT FROM MY HAND

THEN BOSS TIGER WILL HAVE THE RING *AND* YOUR FINGER

BLOOD *AND* GOLD

WAIT! WE COULD TRY BUTTER!
OR GOOSEFAT!
HOLD STILL!
YOU HAVE NINE MORE!
OOP!
Uh?
THE RING--
YOU SEE? IT IS--
CURSED?

I AM *SORRY*, TEI SU

IT IS *FITTING*, PRINCESS ZHENG

FATHER'S TREASURED LIBRARY DIED *WITH* HIM

BUT FOR *ONE* BOOK

THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS. FATHER NEVER LET ME OPEN IT. IT IS *MORE* THAN PAPER AND INK.

TO VIEW IT IS TO SEE FUTURE DAYS.

DAYS OF SUCH TERROR THAT *SIGHT* OF THEM TOOK YOUR FATHER'S *LIFE*.

TO HAVE SUCH AN ARTIFACT *AND* THE RING OF STAFFS STOLEN BY A COMMON THUG

I MUST FIND THIS THIEF WHILE THE SKY IS STILL DARK AND THE CITY'S GATES ARE BARRED.

SHOULD HE ESCAPE, THEN WE SHALL *ALL* BE CONSUMED BY THE HORROR YOUR FATHER FORESAW.

I SHALL *REMAIN*, PRINCESS ZHENG—

"--THERE IS STILL MUCH TO BE DONE."

IT'S CURSED! STAY AWAY!

HE IS A MASTER OF THE STAFF!

NO, I'M NOT!

Huh?

I'M NOT DOING THIS!

I MEAN, I AM, BUT IT'S NOT ME!

HO!

CAREFUL!

LOOK OUT!

Ooh!

HA!

YOU MISSED!

Huh-woop!

NO!

HE'S DEAD!

HANA

IT WASN'T ME, IT WAS BOON'S FAULT!

TELL THAT TO BOSS TIGER!

ALARM! ALARM! THIEVES!

HANA, I SWEAR BY MY ANCESTORS THAT YOUR DEATH WAS NOT MY FAULT I ONLY KNOW I MUST

RUN!

ONE WENT *THIS* WAY!

THIS IS *A BLIND* ALLEY!

WE SHALL *TRAP* HIM HERE!

YOU SEE WHAT I WAS *TALKING* ABOUT?

GAH!

AND YOU FORGOT THE SCROLL

MEE-MMBD!

I'M GOING MAD

WE ARE BUT AN *HOUR* FROM SUNRISE THE WORLD RE-AWAKENS.

WHAT SWEETER WAY TO BEGIN THE MORNING THAN WITH THE *WINNINGS* OF THE NIGHT BEFORE

OBLIGATION *BEFORE* PLEASURE, JUDGE

YOU *BORE* ME, NUBOTAI

LIKE A NOISOME *RAIN.*

MY POWER OVER THIS CITY IS *UNQUESTIONED*

I WILL HAVE THIS THIEF *AND* WHAT HE STOLE IF I MUST BURN EVERY HOUSE WITHIN THESE WALLS TO *ASH!*

YOUR ZEAL WILL NOT BE *UNREWARDED.* WHEN THE KHAN COMES TO POWER THIS CITY WILL REMAIN YOURS.

YOU WILL RULE WITH A HAND ALL YOUR *OWN* NOT THE SUZERAINTY GRANTED YOU AT THE WHIM OF THE EMPEROR

I LOOK *FORWARD* TO THAT JOYOUS DAY

ESTEEMED JUSTICE XAIN, A GIFT FROM THE MERCHANT FONG.

Ah. IT HAS *ARRIVED.*

UNROLL IT QUICKLY I WOULD *GAZE* UPON ITS DELIGHTS.

I WAS *UNAWARE* OF YOUR INTEREST IN CARPETS, X'AIN

SOMETIMES YOU *AMUSE* ME, NUBOTAI

THE CARPET IS MERE *BAGGAGE*

IT IS *ENOUGH* SHAME TO LOSE ONE'S DAUGHTER ON A BET

IT WOULD BE NEEDLESSLY CRUEL TO COMPOUND HIS DISHONOR BY PARADING HER THROUGH THE MARKET CROWD.

YOU REALLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'VE STOLEN

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THE HOUSE OF WING TE. SUN?

BOSS TIGER SENT ME HE CLAIMED A GEM CALLED THE *PHOENIX HEART* WAS THERE

BUT THERE WAS NOTHING BUT BOOKS AND THIS HATEFUL RING

THAT RING IS ANCIENT *BEYOND* TIME IT HOLDS POWER UNIMAGINABLE

DID YOU NOT *SEE* HOW IT MADE YOU THE MASTER OF THE STAFF?

I AM MAD

A MONKEY SPEAKS AND I UNDERSTAND

STUPID!

NOT MADNESS!

MAGIC!

MYSTICISM LIGHT ***AND*** DARK!

YOU NEED *PROOF?* SEE *INSIDE!*

I HAVE SEEN IT IT S UGLY

BUT YOU HAVE NOT TRULY SEEN T

YOU HAVE NO CONCEPTION OF HOW UGLY BOON

THIS BOON IS ALIVE

— NOT A PICTURE OF HELL BUT HELL ITSELF

GOD OF MY FATHERS

HANA

I *KNOW* HE CAME THIS WAY

A MEMBER OF THE CRIME GUILD A THIEF

I DO NOT LIKE WHAT I SEE TONIGHT

THE CITY IS *ALIVE* WITH SPIRITS AND EVIL OMENS I FEEL IT IN MY BONES

IT IS *AGE* YOU FEEL

YOU SAY YOU *KNOW* THIS THIEF?

IT WILL COME TO ME. I *ARRESTED* HIM WHEN HE WAS A CHILD

A *CURSE* LIES UPON THIS CITY WE SHALL *ALL* SUFFER UNDER IT.

BE *QUIET!* KAO IS *THINKING!*

HE IS AN ORPHAN RAISED BY BOSS TIGER A SKILLED BURGLAR

HIS NAME IS. IS

BOON SAI HONG

THE JADE RAT!

BOON SAI HONG

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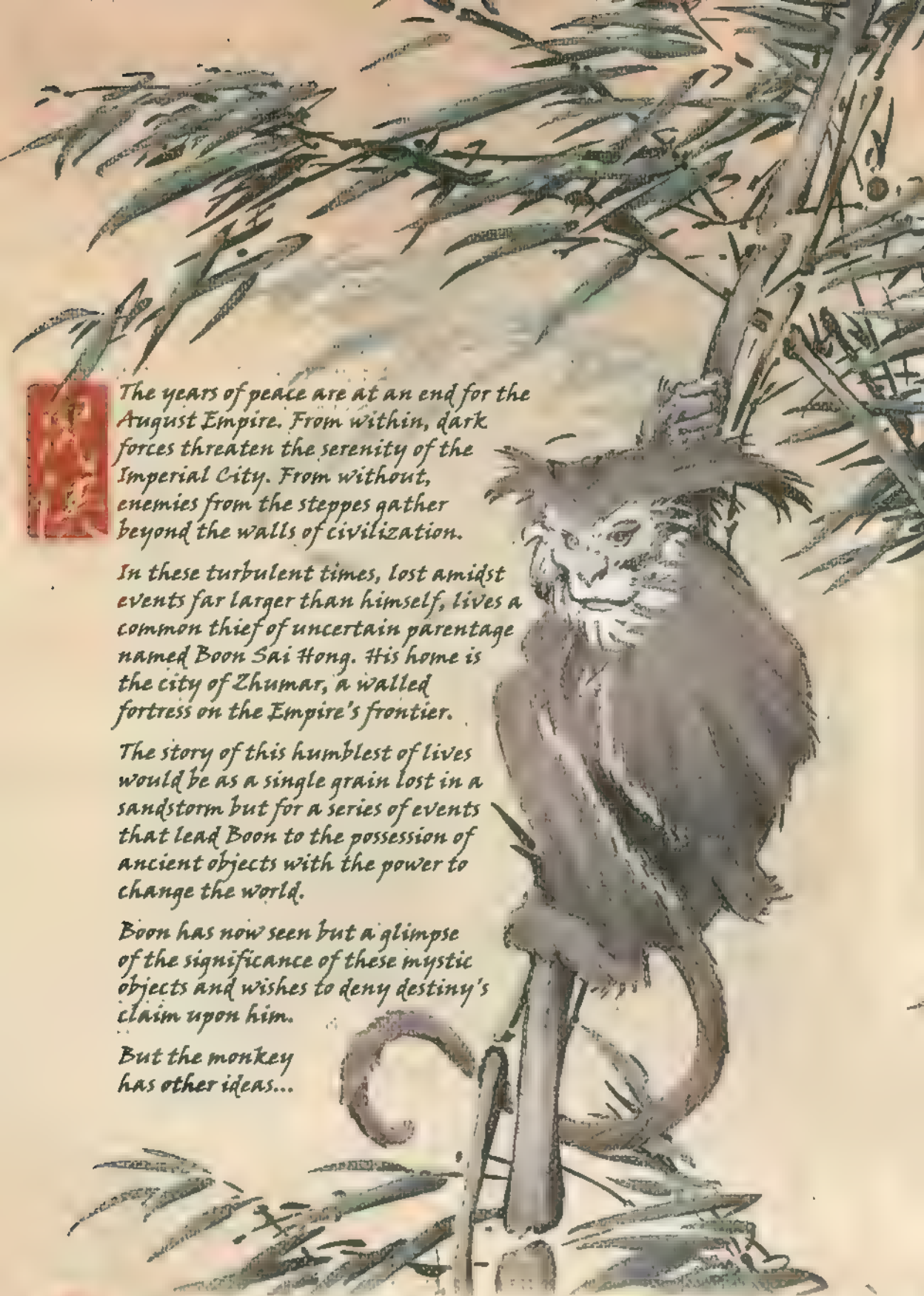

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In these turbulent times, lost amidst events far larger than himself, lives a common thief of uncertain parentage named Boon Sai Hong. His home is the city of Zhumar, a walled fortress on the Empire's frontier.

The story of this humblest of lives would be as a single grain lost in a sandstorm but for a series of events that lead Boon to the possession of ancient objects with the power to change the world.

Boon has now seen but a glimpse of the significance of these mystic objects and wishes to deny destiny's claim upon him.

But the monkey has other ideas...

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NO!
I WANT NO PART OF THIS! TAKE THAT SCROLL AWAY!
YOU ARE CHOSEN, BOON! CHOSEN BY FATE TO WEAR THE RING AND BEAR THIS HELLISH BOOK!
CHOOSE SOMEONE ELSE!

"Run from one fate only to run to another. Better to chance destiny's winds than to break against them." Wing Tei Sun

THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS!
IF FATE CHOOSES YOU, YOU REMAIN CHOSEN!
NOT ME NO MORE RINGS OR CURSES OR TALKING MONKEYS
COWARD!
THIEF!
QUITTER!
YOU CANNOT DENY THE WAY DESTINED FOR YOU!
REALLY? AND WHAT WILL YOU DO ABOUT IT PO PO?
I WILL BEAT YOUR DESTINY INTO YOU
HAHA! HAHAHA! HAHA!

=UNNH!=

HOW DID YOU DO THAT?
SHUT UP AND LISTEN THERE IS MUCH YOU DON'T KNOW
GODS OF THE DEEP AND THE SKIES, THERE IS SO MUCH
THE THEFT OF THE RING AND SCROLL HAVE MADE YOU MANY DANGEROUS ENEMIES, BOON SAI HONG
BUT ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT YOUR MOST TALENTED ADVERSARY WILL ALWAYS BE—
ME!
UH!
UH!
UH!

WHOA!
THE RING IS THE RING OF STAFFS. THE BOOK IS THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS.
AND THEY THINK YOU'VE STOLEN THE PHOENIX HEART
WHO THINKS THIS?
EVERYONE. EVERYONE WHO CAN RAISE A HAND OR A BLADE AGAINST YOU.
FROM THE HIGHEST BORN.
TO THE LOWEST CASTES.
BOON HAS BETRAYED US AND CHEATED US FOR THE LAST TIME
THE LAST TIME

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN, MERCIFUL BOSS TIGER?
IT MEANS I WANT HIM DEAD, STUPID. HE KILLED KANA. HE STOLE VALUABLES AND DID *NOT* PAY TRIBUTE
AND HE BRINGS THE JUDGE AND HIS GUARDS UPON OUR SORRY HEADS
THEY SEEK HIM AND WHAT HE STOLE. A BOOK, A RING, AND THE FABLED PHOENIX HEART
THEY WILL RUIN US ALL TO FIND HIM
THEY WILL *HANG* US AND *BURN* US AND *CRUCIFY* US.
UNLESS WE CAN BRING BOON'S HEAD TO THE JUDGE *OURSELVES*
MPP--
SH!

UNTIL THEN, THERE CAN BE NO PEACE FOR THE CRIMINAL CASTE
THIS POON SAI SONG COULD BE ANYWHERE THE CITY IS TOO BIG
BOON SAI HONG AND MAYBE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE YOUR OPINIONS WITH THE JUDGE
I ONLY SAY THAT HE COULD BE ANYWHERE
PERHAPS HE HIDES UNDER YOUR BED, SAMPO.
OR IN YOUR BED WITH YOUR WIFE!
A SOUND! SHOUTING!
UH!
LET ME GO!
LET ME GO!

NOT UNTIL YOU SEE SENSE!
I CAN'T SEE AT ALL!
UNNH!
THWAK
WITH OR WITHOUT YOUR EYES YOU ARE JUST AS BLIND!
IT'S HIM!
THE THIEF!
OWWWW

KILL HIM!

CRUNCH
YIIIEEE!
SMASH
OW!
FIND A STA-AFF
OOOFF!
SMAKSMAKSMAKSMAK
FWIP
EEP!
THUNK
FIND A STAFF!

WHO SAID THAT?
I DON'T KNOW
IT CAME FROM
UNGH!
UH?
IT'S NOT WORKING
KRAKT

LET'S TRY THIS AGAIN, eh?
WHOAA!
UNPH!
OOH!

THERE IS A DEADLINE, JUDGE XAIN
DEADLINE?
TO FIND THE RING AND THE PHOENIX HEART
I KNEW OF YOUR MASTER'S IMPATIENT DESIRE BUT I WAS UNAWARE OF ANY DEADLINE
IS HE ALWAYS SO SECRETIVE?
IN MATTERS AS URGENT AS THIS -- ALWAYS
AND IS MY EFFICIENCY IN QUESTION?
HAVE I NOT SET THE CITY GUARD ON THIS THIEF? HAVE I NOT TRAPPED HIM WITHIN THESE WALLS?

IT IS NOT YOUR EFFICIENCY THAT IS IN QUESTION
THEN WHAT IS IN QUESTION?
MY LOYALTY?
MY WORD?
I WILL FIND WHAT THE KHAN SEEKS!
I WILL NOT FAIL

TO ME
FOLLOW THAT MAN
FOLLOW HIM UNSEEN AND UNHEARD
SHOULD HE TRY TO *LEAVE* ZHUMAR
WELL, JUST BE CERTAIN HE *DOESN'T*

HA!
TO CELEBRATE A VICTORY IS TO SOON MOURN A DEFEAT
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? I BEAT THEM ALL
AND ALL OF THEM?
GWAHS
THE THIEF!
UP HERE!

FLIGHT IS YOUR BEST HOPE, BOON SAI HONG
THERE ARE TOO MANY TO FIGHT
I THINK--
--YOU'RE RIGHT

HFF
HFF
HFF
HFF
HFF
HFF
HFF
HFF
ORDERS...hff FROM JUDGE XAIN hff DENY EXIT TO
THE THIEF, RIGHT?
WE KNOW ABOUT THE THIEF
HE WILL NOT PASS OUR GATE
NO hff NI BOTA.
AN OUTLANDER
THE THIN ONE
ON THE DARK PONY
HE HAD A SEAL OF PASSAGE FROM THE JUDGE
HE LEFT THROUGH THIS GATE AN HOUR PAST

HE RODE WEST ALONG THE CARAVAN ROAD
HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?
I SET MY BEST MEN UPON HIM!
FIND THE THIEF!
THOSE WHO SUCCEED WILL BE SHOWERED WITH WEALTH!
THOSE WHO FAIL WILL DIE SPITTING BLOOD!

DO I KNOW YOU?
WHY DO YOU HELP ME?
WE HAVE MET
I HELP YOU BECAUSE IT IS THE WAY
THE WAY?
THE OBJECTS YOU HAVE STOLEN
THEY BELONG TO YOU? TAKE THEM!
THEY ARE YOURS NOW, IN MANY WAYS THEY WERE ALWAYS YOURS
IT IS FATE IT IS YOUR BURDEN
IT IS THE ONLY HOPE OF OUR PEOPLE
I DON'T WANT THEM! I'M SORRY I STOLE THEM!
I NEVER WANT TO STEAL ANYTHING EVER AGAIN!
I'LL BECOME A MONK!

THE ANCIENT BOOKS OF DAYS TO COME *TOLD* OF ONE BORN IN THE YEAR OF THE RAT
THIS WORTHY ONE WOULD TAKE POSSESSION OF *THREE* OBJECTS OF CELESTIAL POWER
A RING A BOOK THE HEART OF THE PHOENIX
神
I *HAVE* THE CURSED BOOK
AND I CAN'T GET THE *RING* OFF MY HAND
BUT I *DON'T* HAVE THE PHOENIX HEART
YOU DON'T *HAVE* IT?
NO!
THEN WHO *DOES?*

BOSS TIGER SAID HE WANTED TH S

HE *ALSO* WANTS THE BOOK AND RING!

AND WE DON T *HAVE* THE BOOK AND RING

SO HE WILL BE *HAPPY* TO SEE THIS AT LEAST

SO HAPPY HE LL *MARROW* US UNTIL WE TELL H M WHERE THE *OTHER* PIECES ARE

BOON HAS THEM

AND YOU WOULD *BETRAY* BOON WHO IS LIKE A BROTHER TO US?

FOR *THIS*?

FOR *THIS* ANY MAN MIGHT TURN ON ANOTHER

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The story of this humblest of lives would be as a single grain lost in a sandstorm but for a series of events that lead Boon to the possession of ancient objects with the power to change the world.

Boon has suffered humiliation at the hands (and feet) of a monkey but still denies the task that fate has handed him. Now, Nubotai, an agent of the Great Bhuto Khan, has slipped from the city to rejoin his master. This may spell betrayal for Judge X'ain and doom for Zhumar.

Our tale resumes with Nubotai nearing the barbarian encampment...

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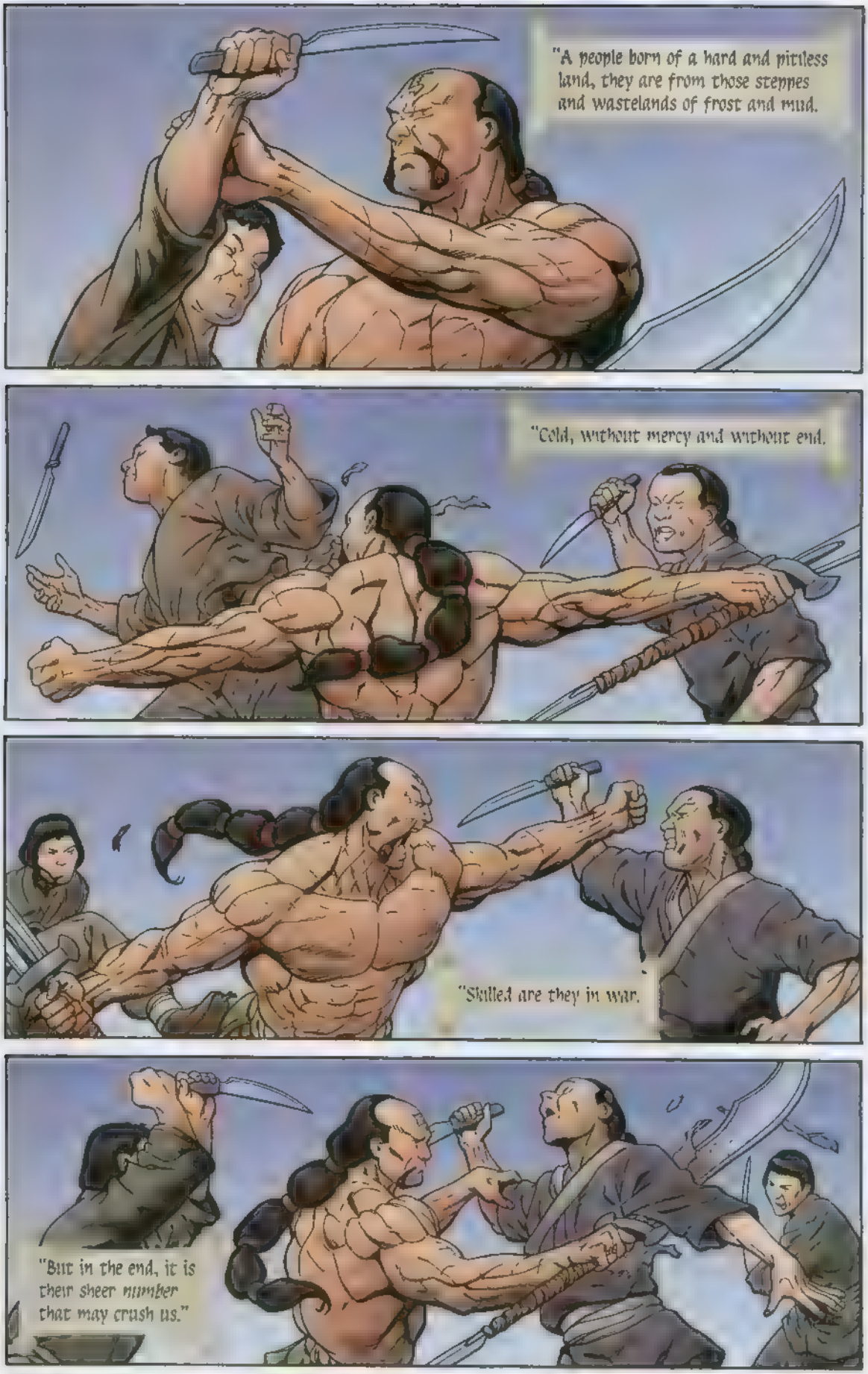
"For all of our fine ways we are in danger.
For all our virtues there is a weakness.
For every dream there is a danger."
from *Principles of Civilization* by Wing Tei Sun

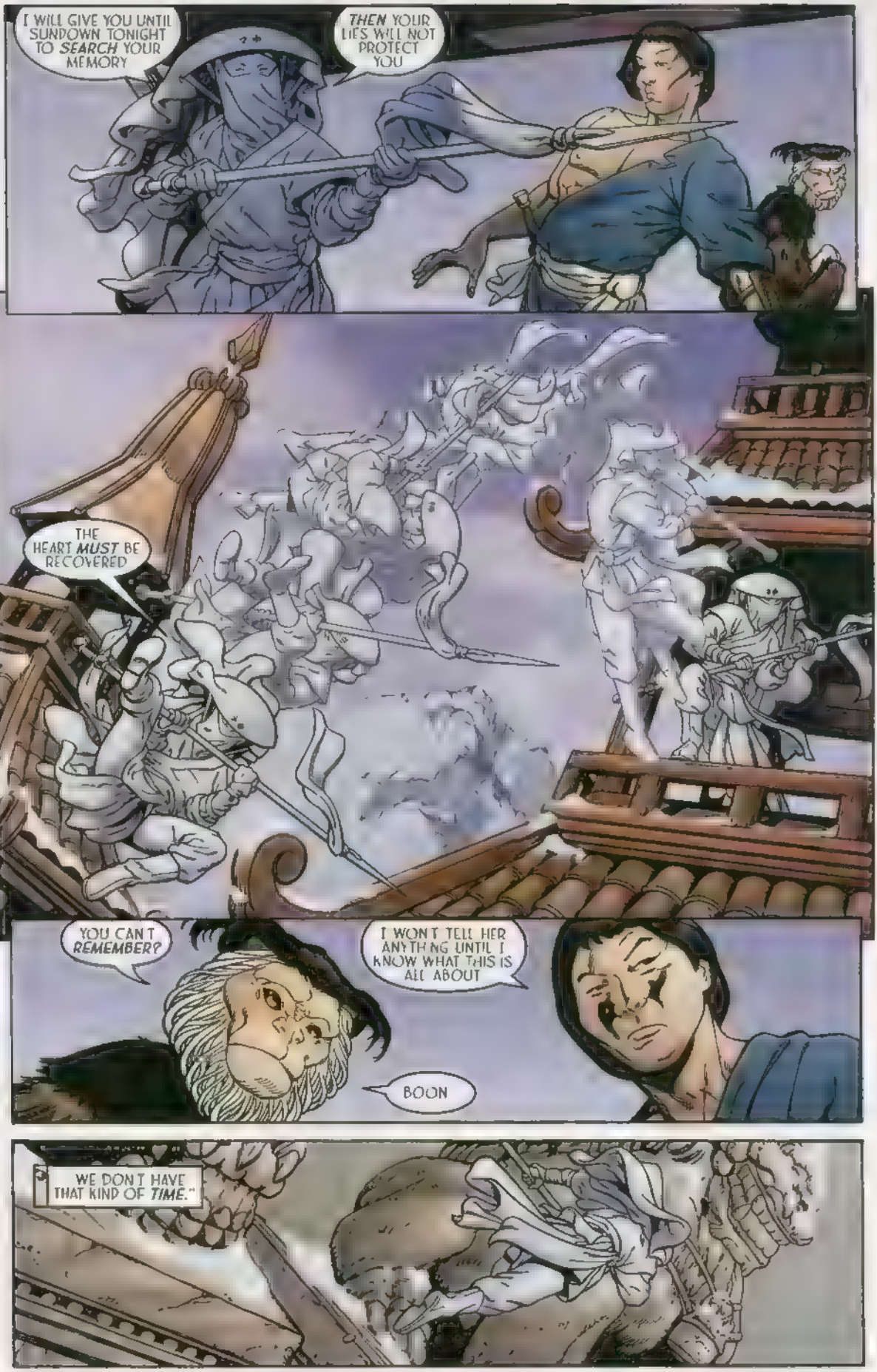
"Outside of our temples and palaces and libraries are those who care nothing for our fine art and writing and thought.
"To the South the Ghilzais.
"To the East the armies of Nayado's emperor.

"To the West the Devil's own horsemen.
"Limitless in ferocity and number. Infinite in cruelty. They wait like hunting wolves for a sign of frailty or moment of inattention."
"Be forever watchful. Should one come to forge the tribes into a killing wind from the West, that will be the last of our days."


"A people born of a hard and pitiless land, they are from those steppes and wastelands of frost and mud.
"Cold, without mercy and without end.
"Skilled are they in war.
"But in the end, it is their sheer *number* that may crush us."

"For they do not invade our lands--
"--they migrate to them."
MY FRIEND AND GENERAL
NUBOTA!
WHAT WORD DO YOU BRING FROM ZHUMAR?
HAS THAT JUDGE SURRENDERED WHAT I ASK?
OR MUST WE PUT THIS ENTIRE EMPIRE TO THE SWORD?

OR IS IT BAD NEWS YOU BRING ME?
THE HEART THE PHOENIX HEART IS MISSING?
THEN WHO STOLE IT?
I DON'T KNOW I NEVER SAW IT
SOMEONE GOT THERE BEFORE ME?
WHO TOLD YOU TO STEAL IT?
YOU COULD NOT HAVE KNOWN WANG TEI SUN HELD THESE TREASURES IN HIS LIBRARY
I--I CAN'T REMEMBER
LET ME THINK--


I WILL GIVE YOU UNTIL SUNDOWN TONIGHT TO *SEARCH* YOUR MEMORY
THEN YOUR LIES WILL NOT PROTECT YOU
THE HEART *MUST* BE RECOVERED
YOU CAN'T *REMEMBER?*
I WON'T TELL HER ANYTHING UNTIL I KNOW WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT
BOON
"WE DON'T HAVE THAT KIND OF *TIME.*"

MORONS!
A SIMPLE ORDER! FIND A THIEF TRAPPED WITHIN THE WALLS!
AND DENY ANOTHER MAN EXIT FROM THE CITY!
YOU HAVE NOT FOUND THE THIEF AND YOU HAVE ALLOWED NUBOTA TO RIDE PAST YOU!
HAVE YOU ANY IDEA WHAT YOUR ACTIONS VISIT UPON THIS CITY?
GO!
FIND THE THIEF! THERE MAY STILL BE TIME!
AS YOU COMMAND, JUDGE XAIN!
LOST ALL IS LOST

AND ALL BECAUSE OF A SINGLE WRETCHED BURGLAR
ARE WE ALMOST THERE?
SHI

PRINCESS?

I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT WANT BREAKFAST

YOU SLEPT WELL?

A BIT *RESTLESS*, TEI SU

NOT FOR LACK OF COMFORT

YOUR HOME IS QUITE CHARMING AND YOU HAVE MADE ME WELCOME EVEN IN YOUR TIME OF *GRIEF*

MY FATHER'S SPIRIT WOULD NOT REST EASY WERE I ANYTHING *LESS* THAN ACCOMODATING TO HIS INVITED GUEST

YOU HAVE BEEN *MOST* KIND

I MUST NOT, HOWEVER, ALLOW YOUR HOSPITALITY TO DETER ME FROM MY TASK

HU JIAO!

BOON SAI HONG THE ENTIRE *CITY* IS LOOKING FOR YOU

AND *YOU!*

THOUGH THEY DON'T KNOW YOUR *PART* IN THIS

WHAT ARE YOU *TALKING* ABOUT?

IT WAS *YOU* WHO WENT TO THE LIBRARY BEFORE ME!

YOU HEARD BOSS TIGER SEND ME TO STEAL THESE DAMNED THINGS THAT EVERYONE IS *SEARCHING* FOR

BOTH OF YOU ARE IN ON THIS!

YOU *KNOW* WHERE THE PHOENIX HEART IS!

=PTHEW!=

SEE, I KNOW FAR MORE THAN YOU GIVE ME CREDIT FOR
I KNOW SECRETS YOU CAN ONLY WONDER AT
A MYSTICAL BEING SHARES THE MYSTERIES OF A LARGER WORLD WITH ME
PO PO?
PO PO?
PO PO!

HOW WILL YOU BRING DOWN THE JUDGE AND MAKE HIM SURRENDER YOUR PRIZES?
ZHUMAR HAS STOOD UNDEFEATED FOR A THOUSAND YEARS
I HAVE A WAY, NUBOTAI
YOU HAVE MEN AND HORSES, GREAT KHAN BUT IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN THAT
MEET YGOR ZHUBOKHOV HE IS FROM FAR TO THE WEST AND BEYOND THE STEPPE
BHUTO KHAN, YOU HONOR ME WITH A VISIT?
THIS IS NUBOTAI, MY CHIEF STRATEGIST AND ADVISOR
IT IS GOOD TO SHAKE THE HAND OF A FELLOW WARRIOR
AND YOUR EXPERTISE IS IN THE AREA OF THE SIEGE?
TO LAY LOW A CITY, YOU MUST USE EQUAL PARTS OF FORCE AND SCIENCE
LET ME SHOW YOU MY CREATION

FORGED IN MY NATIVE CITY AND BROUGHT HERE, PULLED BY A SCORE OF OXEN
IT THROWS A STONE BALL THE WEIGHT OF A HORSE FOR A DISTANCE OF THREE LEAGUES
AND WHAT DO YOU CALL THIS WONDROUS CREATION?
POT GORA
THE MOUTH OF GOD

NOT SO LOUD

MY HEAD

YOU SHOULDN'T DRINK

I DON'T DRINK ENOUGH

MAYBE IF YOU EAT SOMETHING

AI!

BONK

SNORE?

SHLOORRGGHH...

THAT SNORING

MY POOR HEAD

THERE IS A RING, THE BOOK, AND THE HEART

THEY ARE OF GREAT POWER AND GREAT *AGE*

I'VE *HEARD* THIS! *EVERYONE* TELLS ME THIS!

THE STORY MUST BE TOLD FROM THE *START* OR YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND IT

THIS IS *ONE* RING. THE RING OF *STAFFS*

THERE ARE OTHERS

OTHERS?

HOW *MANY*?

WHO *HAS* THEM?

THAT IS *UNIMPORTANT* RIGHT NOW

EACH RING GRANTS THE WEARER *MASTERY* OVER A MARTIAL DISCIPLINE

THIS ONE GIVES THE WEARER THE ABILITY TO WIELD ANY STICK WEAPON IN A MANNER SUPERIOR TO ALL OTHERS

AND THE *OTHER* RINGS?

THAT IS NOT FOR YOU TO KNOW

BUT TO OWN THEM *ALL*--

DO NOT EVEN *CONTEMPLATE* THAT!

AND THE *BOOK* THE BOOK HAS POWERS AS WELL

THE WORK OF MONKS LONG AGO. MEN DRIVEN *MAD* BY THE VERY PAGES THEY ILLUMINATED

I'M NOT GOING TO OPEN IT
GOOD I DON'T LIKE THOSE PICTURES OF HE...
NOT PICTURES!
A WINDOW A GLIMPSE INTO THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS
AND, IN THE WRONG HANDS, A DOORWAY
AND THE PHOENIX HEART?
IN MANY WAYS, THE MOST SIGNIFICANT OF THEM ALL
AND WHERE IS THAT?
HE HAS IT HE LIES TO YOU ABOUT T
HE'S THE ONE WHO STOLE T
HE JIAO RAISED ME FROM A CHILD, TAUGHT ME THE ART OF THEFT AND CONCEALMENT! ARE YOU SAYING HE'S BETRAYED ME?
BOSS TIGER SENT ME TO STEAL THE HEART! WHY WOULD JIAO STEAL IT INSTEAD?
BECAUSE I TOLD HIM TO

FOOLISHNESS.

JUDGE XAIN HAS US MAN THE RAMPARTS AS THOUGH FOR *WAR* BUT ZHUMAR'S WALLS ARE *IMPENETRABLE*

WHAT ARMY WOULD *DARE* STRIKE AT US?

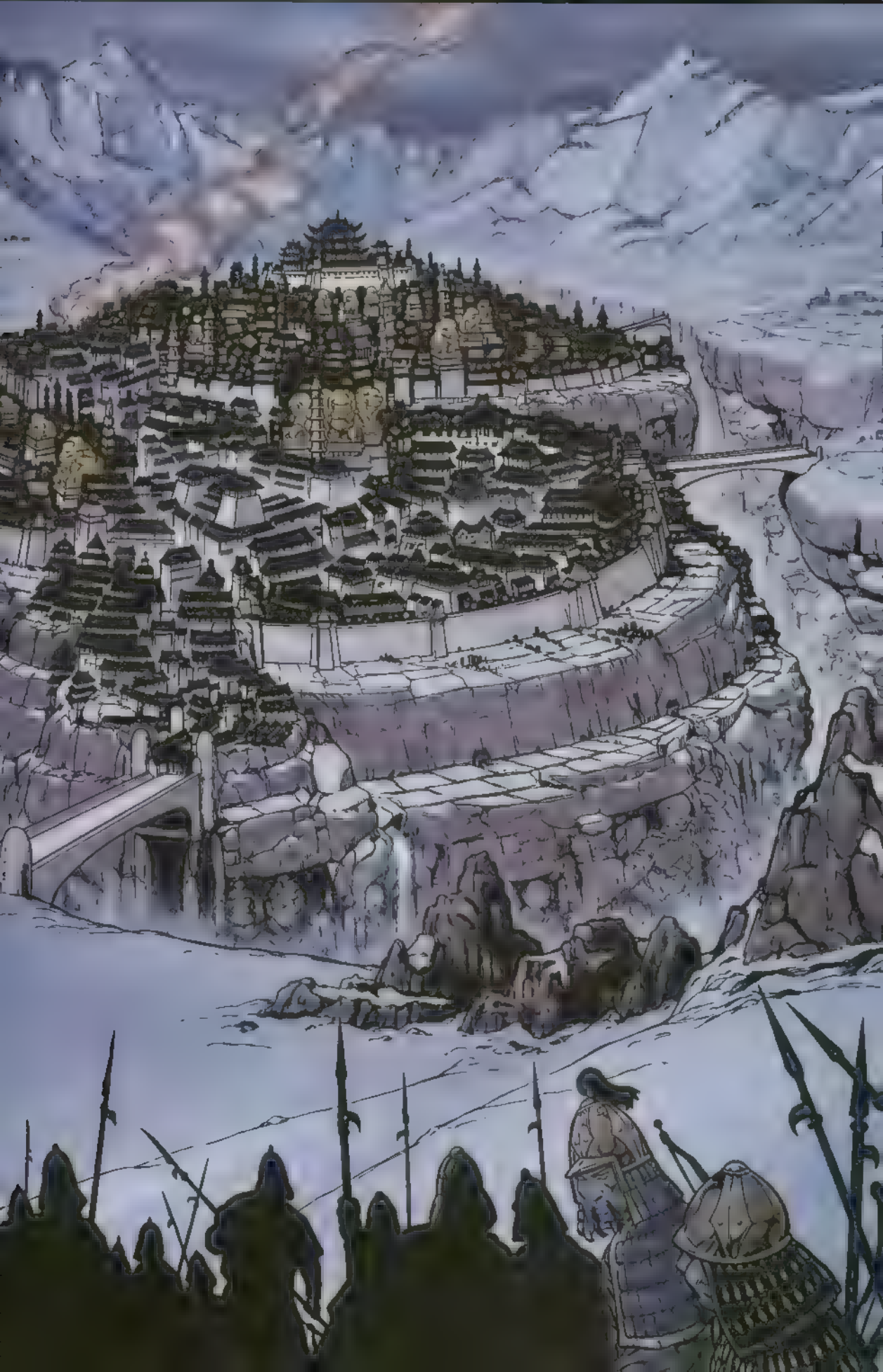
THE JUDGE RAVES AND MEWLS LIKE AN OLD *WOMAN* IF I ONLY--

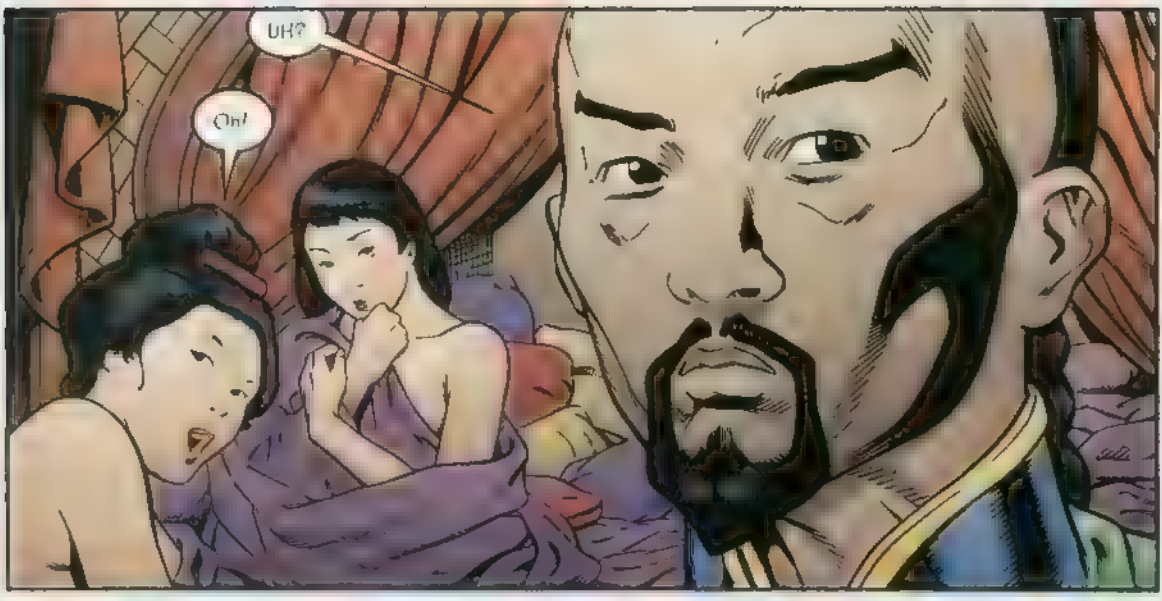
HOLD ON

WHAT'S THAT SOUND?

A KIND OF WHISTLING

ВСЯ СЛАВА СОЯУ ОТЕЦ!
FROM THE MOUTH OF GOD AND INTO YOUR STUPID FACES!
WE GOT THE R RANGE ON THE FIRST SHOT!
NOW SHIFT OUR AIM AND WE'LL BEGIN BREACHING A WALL!




UH?
Oh!

SNOW AND THUNDER?
NO

IT BEGINS

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WAY OF THE RAT
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The years of peace are at an end for the August Empire. From within, dark forces threaten the serenity of the Imperial City. From without, enemies from the steppes gather beyond the walls of civilization.

In these turbulent times, lost amidst events far larger than himself, lives a common thief of uncertain parentage named Boon Sai Hong. His home is the city of Zhumar, a walled fortress on the Empire's frontier.

The story of this humblest of lives would be as a single grain lost in a sandstorm but for a series of events that lead Boon to the possession of ancient objects with the power to change the world.

Po Po, the mysterious talking monkey, reveals more of the secrets and significance of the stolen artifacts to Boon. He stresses to the young thief the importance of not allowing the Ring of Staffs, the Book of Hell, and the still-unrecovered Phoenix Heart to fall into the hands of their many enemies.

But this may prove impossible now that the Great Bhuto Khan has begun hammering down the walls of Zhumar with the massive cannon known as the Mouth of God.

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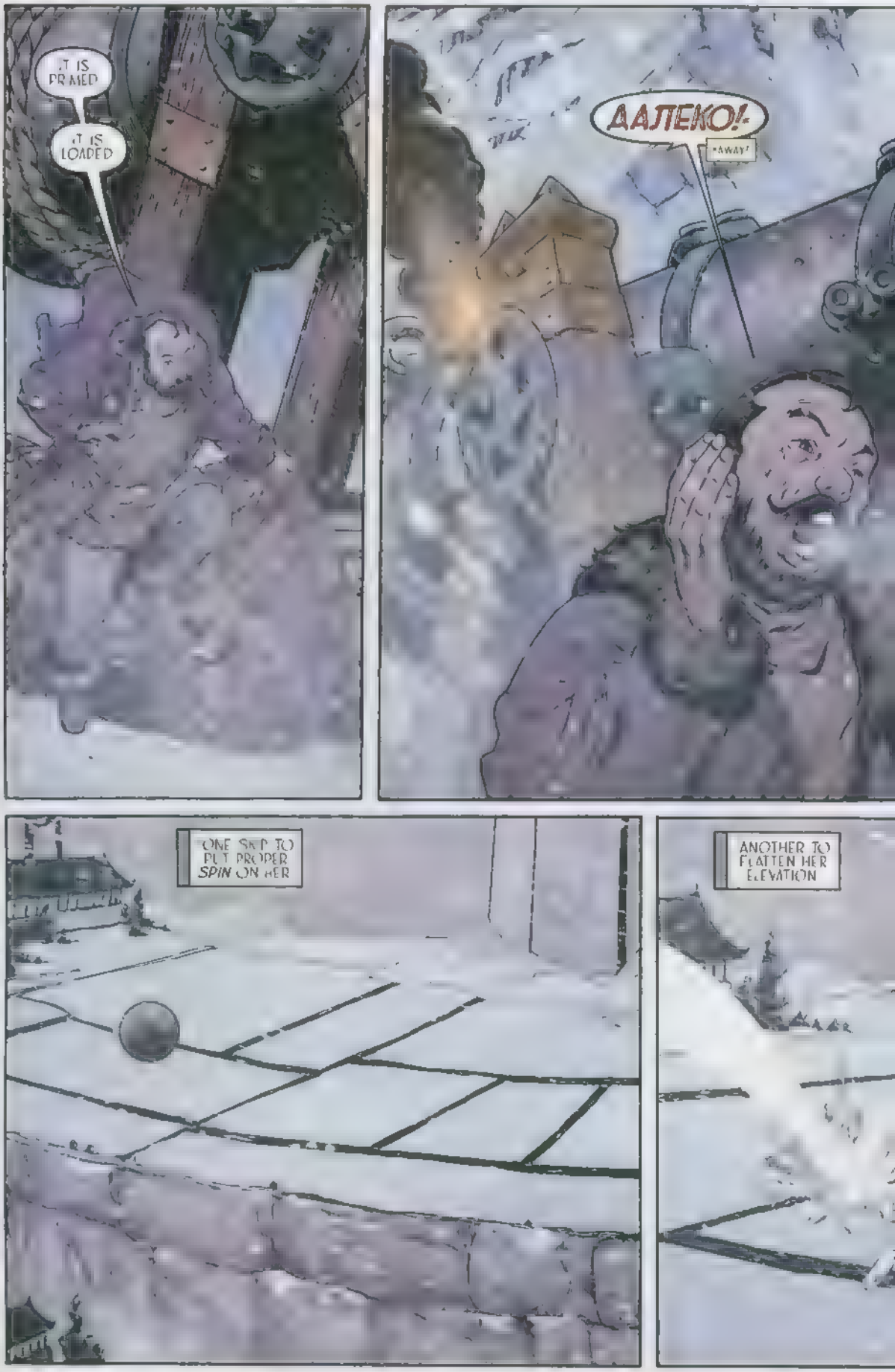
THIS IS A CAREFUL SCIENCE REQUIRING PATIENCE
LIKE SEDUCTION
"Indiscriminate force leads only to more force. Force tempered with cool thought and deep spirit creates an unstoppable energy."
WU TZU


IT IS PRIMED
IT IS LOADED
ДАЛЕКО!-
"AWAY"
ONE SKIP TO PUT PROPER SPIN ON HER
ANOTHER TO FLATTEN HER ELEVATION

THE ANGLE
THE RATE OF
ASCENSION
СОВЕРШЕНСТВОВАНИЕ!-
-PERFECTION
LIKE A STONE SKIPPING OVER A STILL POND
A FIVE *HUNDRED*-WEIGHT STONE

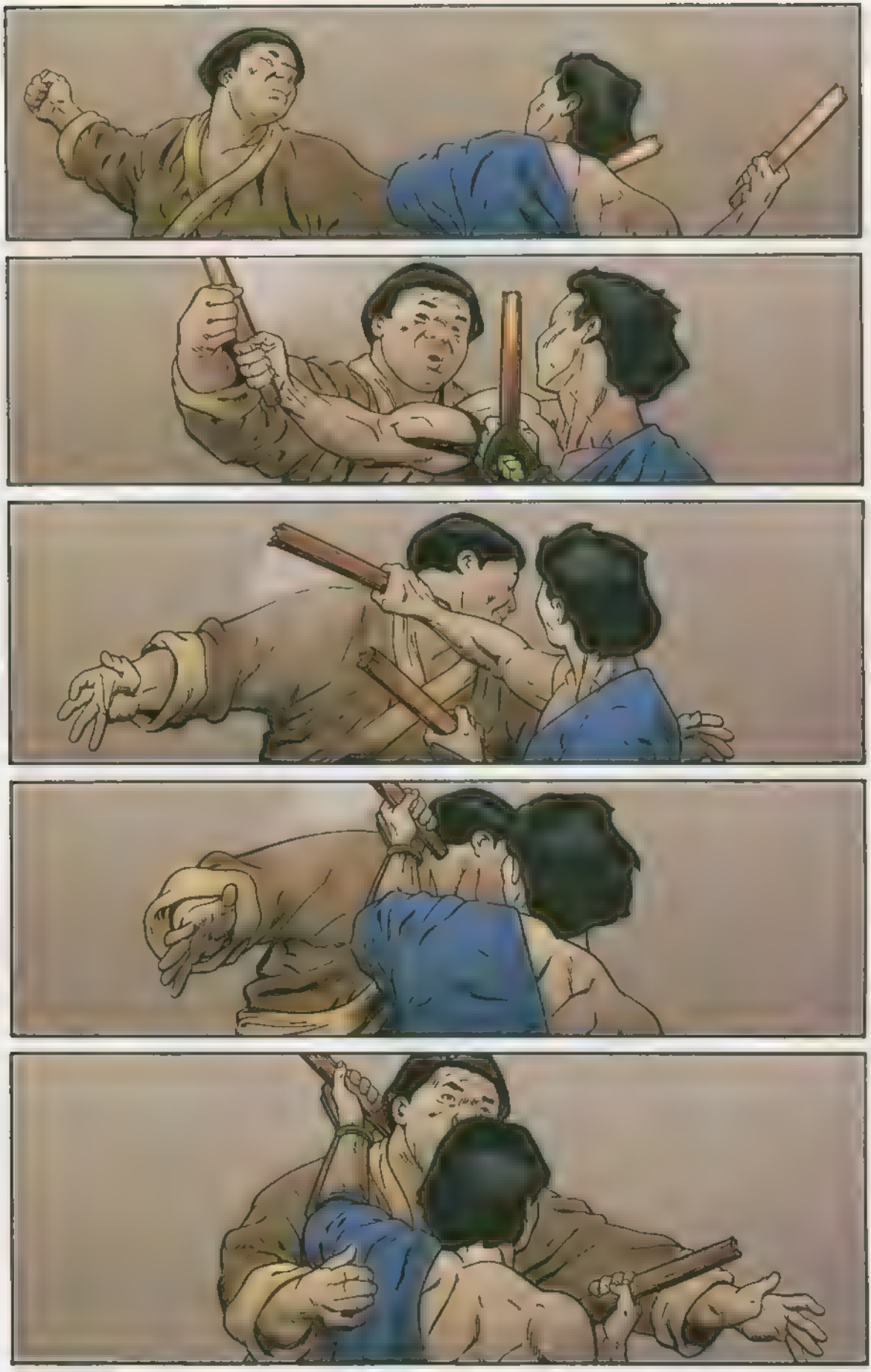
FROM THE MOUTH OF GOD TO THE WALLS OF OUR ENEMIES
КРАСИВОЕ РАЗРУШЕНИЕ

THAT INFERNAL BELCHING HORROR.
THEY STRIKE THE SAME PLACE IN THE WEST WALL OVER AND *OVER* AGAIN
OUR WALLS ARE THIRTY MEASURES STOUT
BUT THEY HAVE *TIME* ON THEIR SIDE, DO THEY NOT?
THAT SNOW DRIFTING AGAINST THE WALLS
THE SAVAGES COULD USE IT AS A *RAMP* TO THE BATTLEMENTS
SEND OUT LABORERS I WANT THAT SNOW *CLEARED*.
OUTSIDE THE WALLS?
OUTSIDE THE WALLS. *INSIDE* THE WALLS
IT WILL MAKE *LITTLE* DIFFERENCE UNLESS THE SNOW IS REMOVED. NO?
NO I MEAN, *YES*, JUDGE XAN!

PRINCESS ZHENG?
IT BEGINS, TE
MY FATHER SENT ME TO *RETRIEVE* THE ARTIFACTS. THEY ARE MISSING NOW, BUT STILL *WITHIN* THESE WALLS
BHUTO KHAN *KNOWS* THIS. HE WILL *LEVEL* ZHUMAR TO FIND THEM
AND WHEN HE *DOES*, TE!
THE EARTH WILL SHIFT THE HEAVENS FALL
AND THE GATES OF EVERY HELL WILL YAWN WIDE
WHERE IS T?

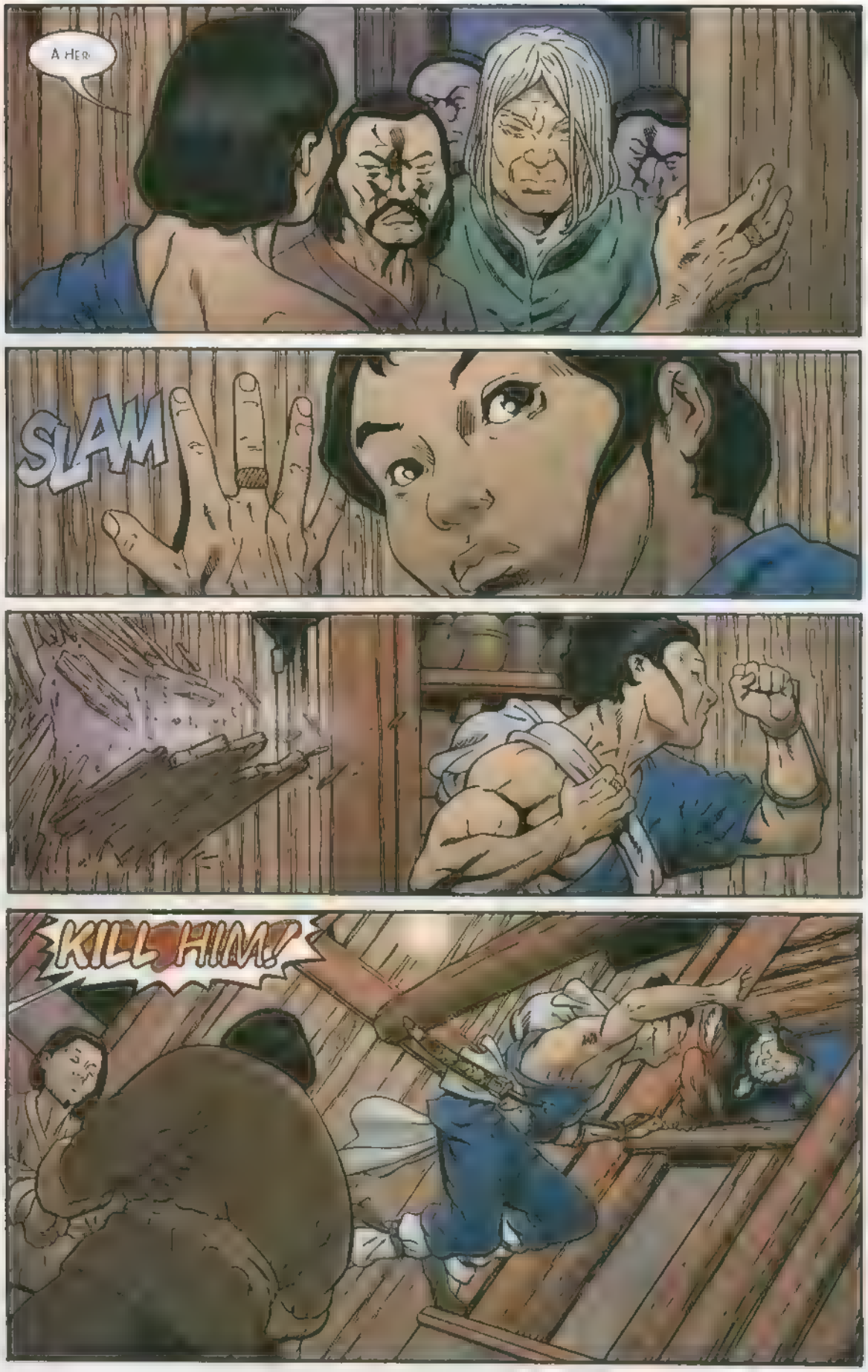
WHERE IS WHAT, BOON?
THE PHOENIX HEART BOSS TIGER SENT ME TO STEAL IT BUT IT'S YOU WHO TOOK IT!
AND HOW WILL YOU MAKE ME HAND IT OVER?
UNNH!
I TAUGHT YOU ALL YOU KNOW, BOON --
-- BUT NOT ALL I KNOW
HNH!
LITTLE BOON -- WE ARE YOUR MASTERS.
YOU WILL ALWAYS BE THE STUDENT
WHOA!
GET A STAFF
Oooh

HA HA!
I DON'T REMEMBER TEACHING HIM TO FIGHT WITH A STOOL
BOON IS TRYING TO BE FUNNY
FUNNY?
ARE YOU LAUGHING NOW?
Uh?



NOW GIVE ME WHAT I WANT OR I'LL SHOW YOU WHAT *ELSE* I CAN DO WITH FURNITURE
UHH! DO WHAT HE *SAYS*, HU JAIO
YES
WE WEREN'T SURE WHAT TO DO WITH IT ANYWAY

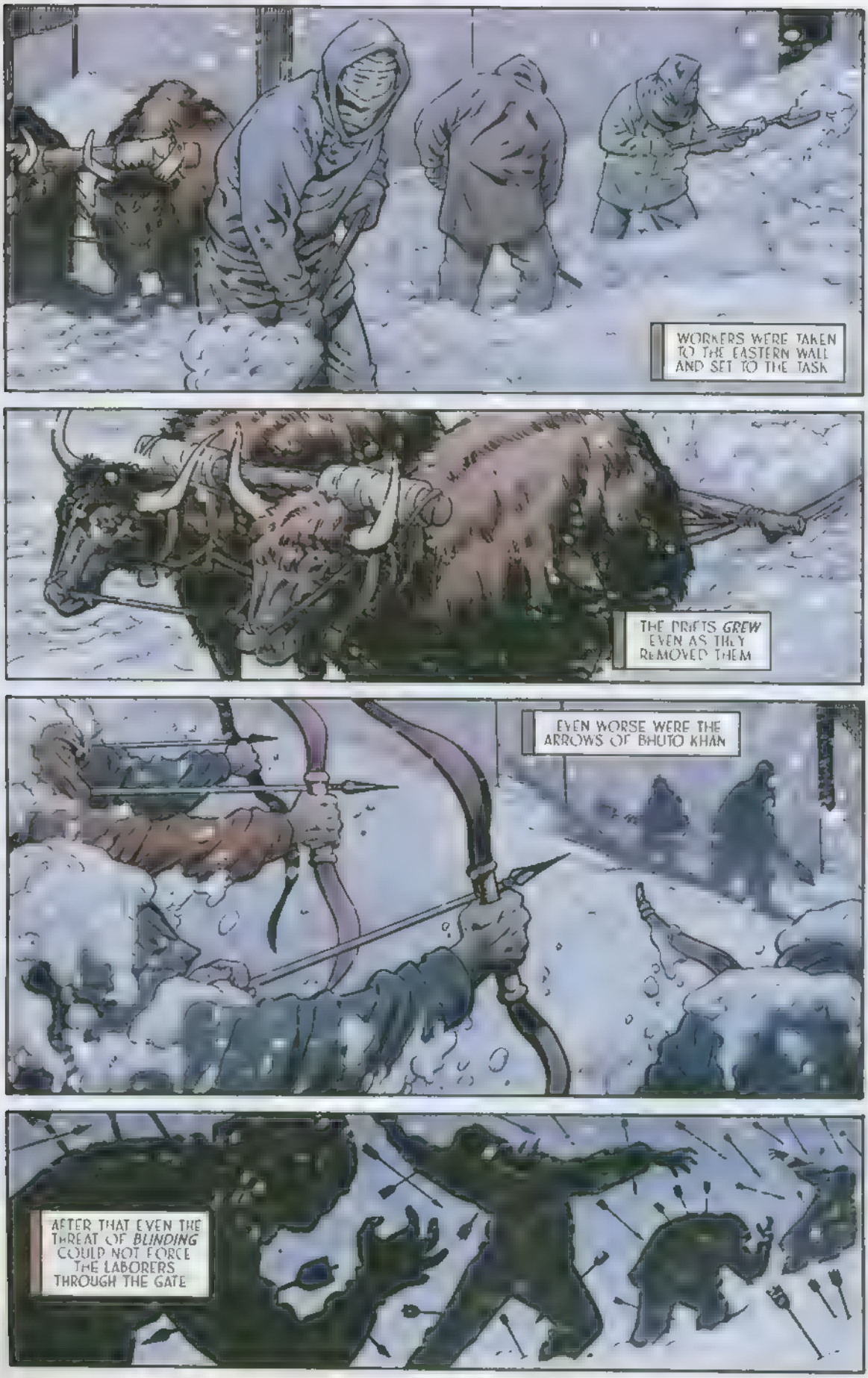
Oh
IS IT A GEM?
I DON'T KNOW
IT'S WARM TO THE TOUCH
IT'S MAGIC
GOOD MAGIC OR BAD?
WHO CAN KNOW?
IT DOESN'T SEEM EV-
Uhhhhh
ENOUGH! I WILL RETURN IT TO THE ONE WHO OWNS IT
RETURN IT?
BUT WE'RE THIEVES!
I AM NO LONGER A COMMON CRIMINAL
I HAVE DECIDED TO BECOME


A HER
SLAM
KILL HIM!

HURRY, BOON
UH! GUH!
YOU MOVE LIKE A COW!
I NEED A STAFF!
HAVE YOU THOUGHT OF CARRYING A STAFF?
MUCH EASIER THAN ALWAYS LOOKING FOR ONE
NNNNG

HAH!

EXCUSE ME!
THIS IS THE LIFE OF A HERO?


WORKERS WERE TAKEN TO THE EASTERN WALL AND SET TO THE TASK
THE DRIFTS *GREW* EVEN AS THEY REMOVED THEM
EVEN WORSE WERE THE ARROWS OF BHUTO KHAN
AFTER THAT EVEN THE THREAT OF *BLINDING* COULD NOT FORCE THE LABORERS THROUGH THE GATE

I HAVE FAILED YOU
IT WOULD APPEAR SO REMOVE YOURSELF FROM MY SIGHT
DOES ANYONE ELSE HAVE BUSINESS BEFORE THE COURT?
YOU MUST MAKE THE HORSEMEN LEAVE, JUDGE XAIN!
WE WILL GIVE THEIR CHIEFTAIN GOLD AS A TRIBUTE
ENOUGH TO PAY HIM FOR PEACE BETWEEN US
WE OFFER BHUTO KHAN A FRACTION OF WHAT HE MAY TAKE BY FORCE?
IT IS NOT A FEW HUNDRED WEIGHT IN GOLD
OR GEMS
OR YOUR VIRGIN DAUGHTERS HE WISHES
HE WANTS BLOOD

HE WANTS HIS HAND ABOUT THE THROAT OF THE *EMPIRE*

TEI ?

OH I AM SORRY

IT IS NO MATTER

FATHER'S SPIRIT WILL NOT BE CALMED BY MY PRAYERS ONLY

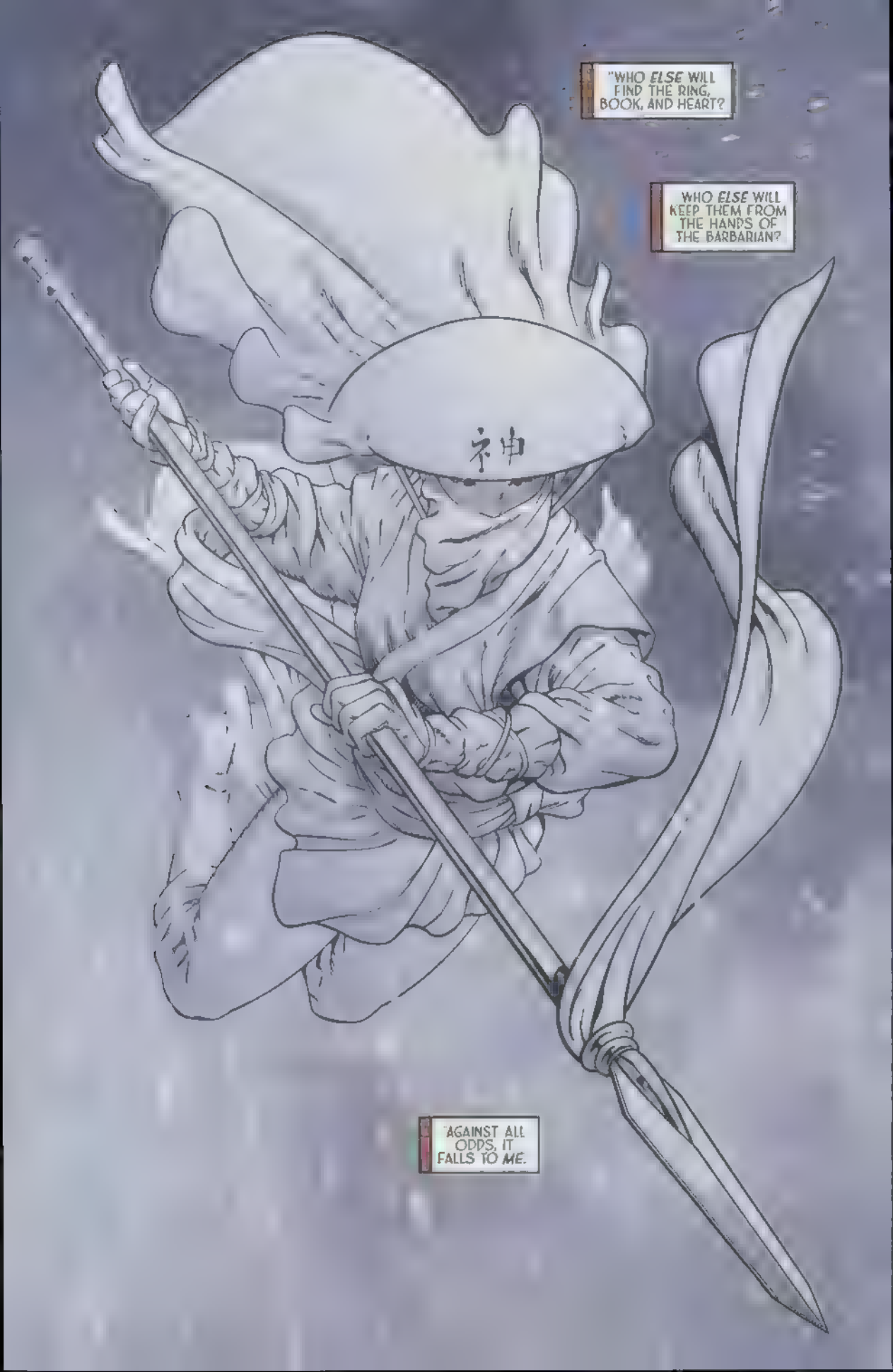
THIS BOOK IN YOUR FATHER'S LIBRARY IT SHOWS THE PHOENIX HEART

A BOOK OF HIS OWN AUTHORSHIP HE SEARCHED MANY YEARS FOR THE HEART

ONLY TO *LOSE* IT THROUGH MY CARELESSNESS

YOU MUST NOT BLAME *YOURSELF*, PRINCESS

WHO *ELSE* WILL TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY?


"WHO ELSE WILL FIND THE RING, BOOK, AND HEART?
WHO ELSE WILL KEEP THEM FROM THE HANDS OF THE BARBARIAN?
"AGAINST ALL ODDS, IT FALLS TO ME.

AND ONE OTHER A FATHERLESS THIEF
HOW LONG, GREAT KHAN?
ZHUBOKHOV SAYS A WEEK MORE AND A BREACH WILL BE MADE
THEN WE RIDE INTO ZHUMAR AND FIND WHAT I SEEK
WE PUT THE PEOPLE TO THE SWORD AND A TORCH TO THEIR HOUSES

ONLY *WE* STAND AGAINST THE DARKNESS
AN ARMY OF *TWO*
BUT HE HAS *NOT* A WEEK'S WORTH OF *STONES*
THE SNOWS GROW *DEEPER*. THE PASSES *CLOSE*. WHILE WE BESEIGE THE CITY, THE SKIES BESEIGE *US*
THEN THE GODS WILL SHOW US *ANOTHER* WAY INTO THE WALLS

FOR IT IS MY *DESTINY* AS DETERMINED AT MY BIRTH
I WILL WEAR THE RINGS
I WILL BE THE FIRST
I WILL WIELD THE POWER GRANTED NO OTHER MORTAL MAN

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The frontier city of Zhumar, last outpost of the Empire where civilization and barbarism clash. All caravan roads lead here. Every wild tribe covets its treasures.

Boon Sai Hong is a common thief who calls this mountain stronghold home. On one regrettable night in his criminal career he stole two ancient artifacts from an old librarian; the Ring of Staffs, which gives its wearer instant mastery over any staffed weapon, and the Book of the Hell of The Hungry Dragons, a scroll depicting the damned souls devoured by the worms of the afterlife.

Now Boon is a hunted man trapped in a walled city isolated in a thousand miles of frozen wilderness. He is pursued by Judge X'ain, appointed by the Emperor to be the unquestioned overlord of Zhumar. The Thieves' Guild also wants Boon's head for violating the oath given to their brotherhood to share and share alike. Princess Zheng Mai Lo, daughter of the Emperor, also seeks the Ring and the Book and another artifact not stolen by Boon: the fabled Phoenix Heart. The Silken Ghost, a mysterious lady warrior, is also shadowing Boon for reasons unknown.

The Khan's attack on the city begins in earnest now. His hordes of archers and swordsmen harry the walls even as the great cannon known as the Mouth of God threatens to reduce Zhumar to rubble...

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'NOW THEY *CLIMB* THE DRIFTS TO GET AT OUR THROATS
EVEN THE *ELEMENTS* BETRAY US.'

"To my enemies I say,
May you live in
interesting times."
Wing Tei Sun

WHY WON'T THEY GO AWAY?
WHY HASN'T WINTER'S CHILL CHASED THEM FROM HERE?
THE WEST WALL THEY POUND AT WITH THAT AWFUL WEAPON
THEY ASSAULT THE WALLS OF THE EAST AND NORTH BY BRUTE FORCE
I WANT THE WALLS CLEARED OF DRIFTS.
AND DON'T TELL ME YOU CANNOT FIND LABORERS WHO WILL DARE THE ARROWS AND BLADES OF THE KHAN
CLEAR THE WALLS!
YES, JUDGE X'AIN!
'TIME IS NOT OUR FRIEND, GREAT KHAN

YOU TIRE ME, NUBOTAI.
YOU TRUST MY COUNSEL. I HAVE NEVER TOLD YOU ANYTHING BUT TRUTH.
THIS SIEGE DOES NOT GO WELL
ZHUBOKHOV HAS NO MORE AMMUNITION FOR HIS GUN
AND IT IS TOO COLD TO QUARRY MORE STONE EVEN WERE THE PASSES OPEN.
WE RUN SHORT OF FOOD FOR THE MEN AND FEED FOR THE HORSES.
OUR FIRES GROW COLD FOR LACK OF FUEL
WHILE THE CITIZENS OF ZHUMAR SIT WARM AND WELL FED IN THEIR HOMES, WE STARVE.
ONE MORE DAY, THEN
ONE MORE DAY

ANY DAY
ANY HOUR THOSE MISERABLE CURS WILL BE WITHIN THE WALLS!
I HAVE NOTHING TO BARTER WITH! I WILL PAY WITH MY HEAD FOR FAILURE!
ONLY IF I HAVE THE RING CAN I SPARE THE CITY!
SEARCH EVERY HOVEL AND ALLEY! FIND BOON SAI HONG!
FIND THIS JADE RAT!
WHY?
WHY DID I ALLOW AMBITION TO SEDUCE ME SO?

I THINK WE LOST THEM, BOON
ARE YOU SURE, PO PO?
Eep!
OH!
I DON'T KNOW! IT'S A SECRET --
SOCIETY
HOW MANY THIEVES ARE THERE IN THE BROTHERHOOD OF THIEVES?

WELL, SOMEONE KNEW YOUR NAME!
Oop!
JUMP!
BUT --
JUMP!
THOSE FRIENDS OF YOURS --
--THEY GAVE YOU UP!"
NNG!
UFF!
YOU WERE HIDING BOON FROM ME?

WHATEVER HE STOLE IS OF *GREAT* POWER AND WORTH!
EVERY *BLADE*, EVERY *FIST* IS RAISED AGAINST US!
HE *DEFIES* THE BROTHERHOOD OF THIEVES, HE DEFIES *ME*, AND YOU *AID* HIM?
HE CAME TO US LOOKING FOR SANCTUARY
AND A PLACE TO HIDE
UNNH!
OW!
I WILL HAVE THE *TRUTH*--
--OR I WILL HAVE YOUR *HEADS*.
LIE TO ME AND I WILL SKIN YOU ALIVE.
SPEAK *ANYTHING* BUT THE TRUTH AND YOUR DYING WILL BE MEASURED IN *WEEKS*.

ONLY WORDS OF TRUTH, TIGER MAH
A SPIRIT CAME TO ME IN THE NIGHT IT TOLD ME OF A COLLECTION OF VALUABLES
A SPIRIT?
PERHAPS THE GHOST OF A THIEF WHISPERING SECRETS TO A BROTHER THIEF
HE TOLD ME OF A PHOENIX HEART
PHOENIX HEART?
I RELATED THE STORY TO BOON SAI HONG
I SENT HIM TO STEAL THE PHOENIX HEART
AND WHAT DID THIS SPIRIT LOOK LIKE?
WE LOST THEM, BOON!

YES, THIS TIME WE *DID* LOSE THEM, PO PO
OR THEY WERE *CHASED* AWAY
WHO ARE *THESE?*
JUDGE *X'AIN'S* MEN

AND THIS WILL WORK?
MAYBE YOU WOULD LIKE TO PUT DOWN YOUR BOW AND PICK UP A SHOVEL?
I AM NO SLAVE.
THEN WE WILL LET THE DEVIL'S BREATH BLOW AWAY THE SNOW
LOOK AT THE DOGS RUN!
IT WORKS!
BRING UP MORE BOMBS!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
I AM THE MASTER OF STAFFS, AM I NOT?
THIS IS A BANNER MAST!
IT'S TEN TIMES YOUR WEIGHT!
YOU'VE TRAPPED US!
IDIOT!
IDIOT!
IDIOT!
I'M TRYING TO THINK!

YOU CAN'T THINK!
AND DO YOU KNOW WHY?
BECAUSE YOU RE AN IDIOT!
IT S A STRATEGY.
THEY CAN ONLY COME AT ME ONE AT A TIME
YES, HUNDREDS OF THEM CAN ATTACK ONLY ONE AT A TIME
YOU MAY DELAY OUR DOOM BY SECONDS THIS WAY!
Ooh!

UNNH!
OW!
Uh?
GAH!
BOON?
WE'RE OUT OF THEIR REACH, RIGHT?

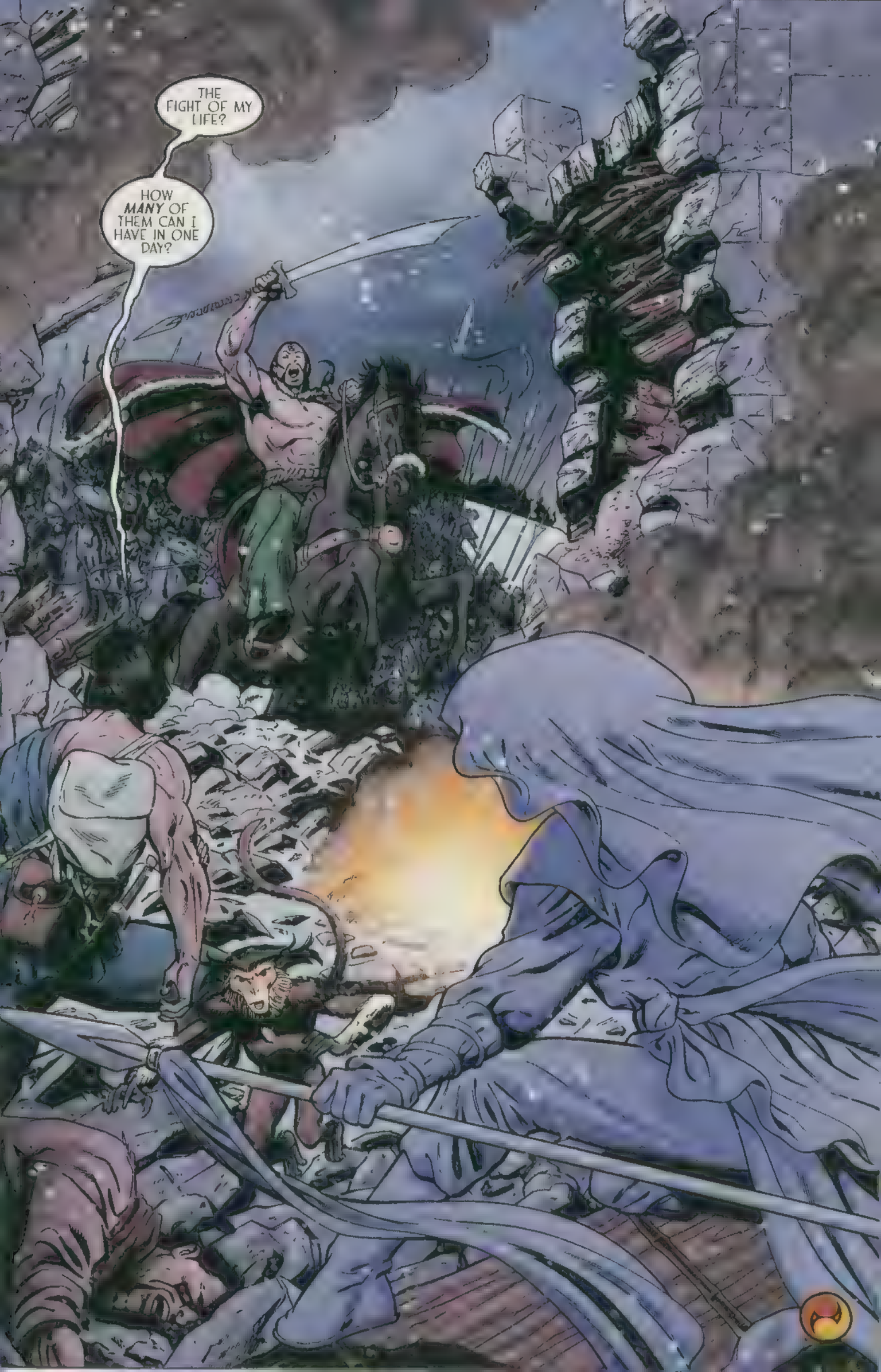
THEY DON'T *HAVE* TO REACH US!
GIVE THEM THE *BOOK!*
NO!
THE *HEART!* GIVE THEM THE HEART!
NO!
Oh
Whuh?
KRK

I'M ALIVE!

IT'S THE THEF KILL HIM
LET ME EXPLAIN!
I WANT TO RETURN WHAT I STOLE!
UNNH!
NNG!
PLEASE LISTEN!

HUNH!
RUN!
COWARDS!
IDIOT?
Uh?
RUN!

Ooooh.
KAFF!
KAFF!
HANK!
BOON SAI HONG, I HAVE FOUND YOU IN TIME
Oh?
IN TIME FOR *WHAT?*
IN TIME FOR THE FIGHT OF YOUR *LIFE.*


THE FIGHT OF MY LIFE?
HOW *MANY* OF THEM CAN I HAVE IN ONE DAY?

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WAY OF THE RAT
CHUCK DIXON
JEFF JOHNSON
TOM RYDER
CHRIS GARCIA

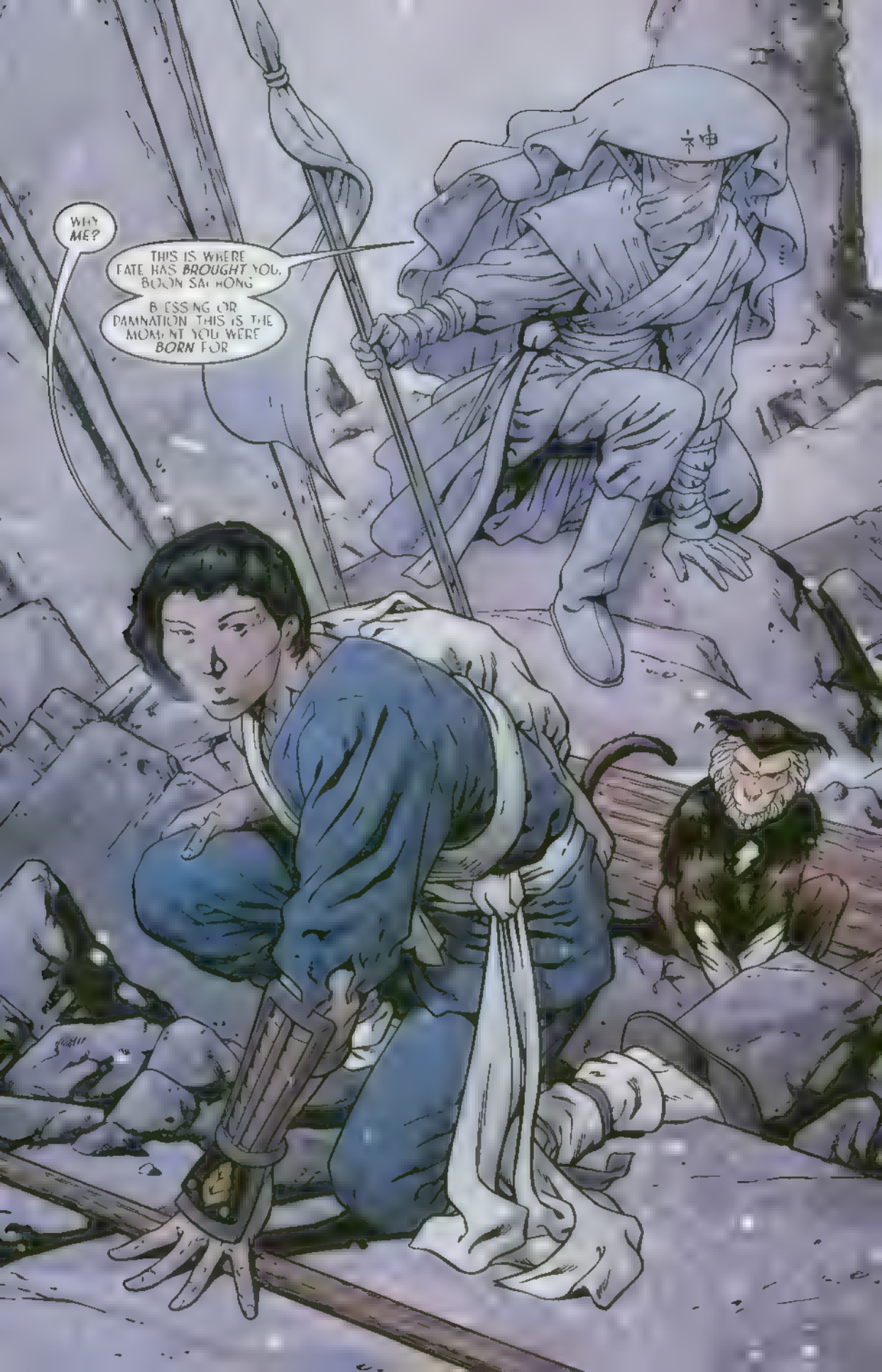
The frontier city of Zhumar, last outpost of the Empire where civilization and barbarism clash. All caravan roads lead here. Every wild tribe covets its treasures.

Boon Sai Hong is a common thief who calls this mountain stronghold home. On one regrettable night in his criminal career he stole two ancient artifacts from an old librarian: the Ring of Staffs, which gives its wearer instant mastery over any staffed weapon, and the Book of the Hell of The Hungry Dragons, a scroll depicting the damned souls devoured by the worms of the afterlife.

Now Boon is a hunted man trapped in a walled city isolated in a thousand miles of frozen wilderness. He is pursued by Judge X'ain, appointed by the Emperor to be the unquestioned overlord of Zhumar. The Thieves Guild also wants Boon's head for violating the oath taken by their brotherhood to share and share alike. Princess Zheng Mai Lo, daughter of the Emperor, also seeks the ring and the book and another artifact not stolen by Boon: the fabled Phoenix Heart. The Silken Ghost, a mysterious lady warrior, is also shadowing Boon for reasons unknown.

In trying to escape from the Judge's assassins, Boon set in motion a series of events that ended with the destruction of a section of Zhumar's defensive walls. Now he faces the wrath of the barbarian hordes with only Po Po and the Silken Ghost by his side.

Way of the Rat™ [illegible] Issue [illegible] NOVEMBER [illegible] PRINTING. Published by CG Entertainment, Inc. Office of publication [illegible] Tampa Road, Suite [illegible], Oldsmar, Florida [illegible]. CrossGen® CrossGen Comics® CrossGeneration® CrossGeneration Comics® and the CrossGen sigil® are registered trademarks of CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. The CG Entertainment logo™, Way of the Rat™ and all characters and images are Trademark and Copyright [illegible] CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. The stories, incidents and characters in this publication are fictional. Any similarities to persons living or dead are purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reproduced in any form without the express written consent of CrossGeneration Comics, Inc. PRINTED IN CANADA


WHY ME?
THIS IS WHERE FATE HAS BROUGHT YOU, BOON SAI HONG
BLESSING OR DAMNATION THIS IS THE MOMENT YOU WERE BORN FOR

TO FACE *ALL* OF THE KHAN'S HORDE ALONE?
TO FACE THE ONLY MAN IN THIS WORLD WHO MIGHT *DEFEAT* YOU.
THE GREAT BUSTO KHAN
ARE *YOU* THE ONE WHO HOLDS MY PRIZE?

THIS IS MY FIGHT, NUBOTAI!
NO ONE LOOSES A BOW WITHOUT WORD FROM ME
AS YOU COMMAND, GREAT KHAN
NOW I WILL HAVE THAT WHICH I SEEK
THE RING AND THE BOOK
YOU CAN'T HAVE THEM
I AND THE RING OF STAFFS WILL SEE TO THAT
AS LONG AS I WEAR IT, I AM INVINCIBLE
...

HAHAHAHA HAHAHA!
YOU ARE INVINCIBLE, BOY
UNTIL YOU FACE THE ONE WHO WEARS THE RING OF BLADES
YOU NEVER MENTIONED A RING OF BLADES!
IT WAS NOT IMPORTANT AT THE TIME
IT'S IMPORTANT NOW!
TRUE HE POSSESSES THE RING OF BLADES BUT HE IS NOT ITS MASTER HE'S NOT CHOSEN BY FATE
YOU CAN DEFEAT HIM

BLADE AGAINST STAFF
-- WHAT CHANCE DO YOU *HAVE?*
STAFF OR STICK I MASTER BOTH
YOUNG FOOL

HUNH!

KAI!

HUNF!

MASTER OR NOT--

--THEY ARE BUT STICKS!

HURRR!

YOU NEED A STAFF OF *STRONGER* DESIGN

HUAH!

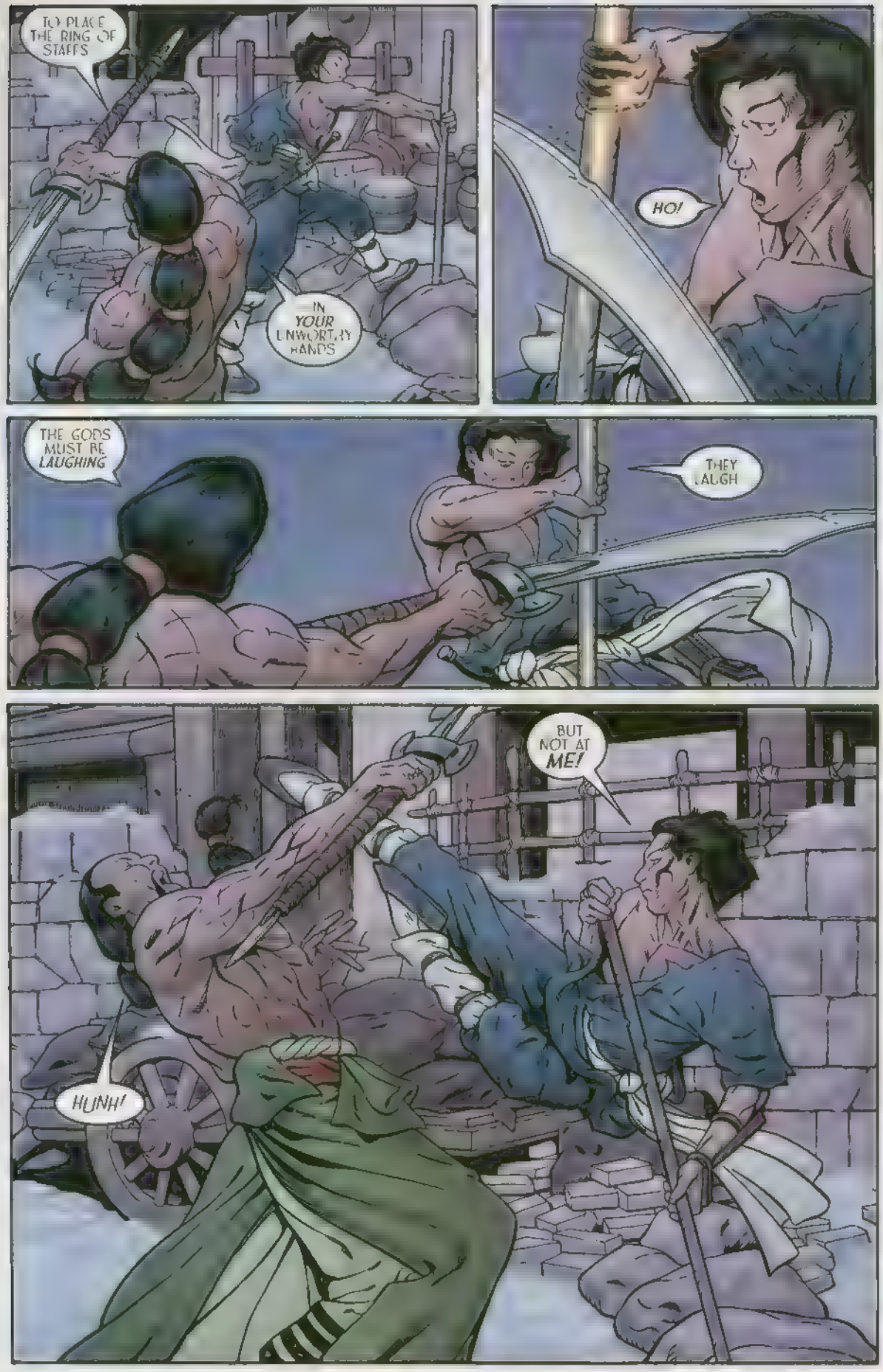
TO THE *ROOF*

WATCH THEM

STOP *RUNNING!* STAND AND *FIGHT!*

YOU WISH TO DIE A *COWARD!*

I *WISH* NOT TO DIE AT *ALL!*


TO PLACE THE RING OF STAFFS
IN YOUR UNWORTHY HANDS
HO!
THE GODS MUST BE LAUGHING
THEY LAUGH
BUT NOT AT ME!
HUNH!

YOU ARE QUICK
UH!
BUT LACK STRENGTH.
STAND AS DE
HERE
UH!
YOU ARE EMBARRASSING US BOTH
YOU SEEK TO HUMILIATE ME? TO FRIGHTEN ME?
EVEN A CORNERED RAT WILL FIGHT!

STEEL AGAINST IRON THEN

YOU WILL LEARN

THE RING

IS ONLY AS POWERFUL

AS THE MAN

WHO WEARS IT

HO!

THE RING GIVES YOU SKILL
BUT NOT A WARRIOR'S ENDURANCE
THIS IS BATTLE, BOY IT IS DIFFERENT
THE BAR IS HEAVY
YOUR ARMS ARE THIN
DO YOU TIRE?
NO!

UNNH!
A LUCKY BLOW
REALLY?
OR PERHAPS YOU TIRE?
YOU WILL REGRET MOCKING ME!
WHEN YOU ARE DEAD AND THIS CITY IS RAZED!
ALL
WILL KNOW YOUR FAILURE!

IRON CANNOT STAND AGAINST FORGED STEEL—

—A BLADE FOLDED AND FORGED COUNTLESS THOUSAND TIMES

THE BLADE OF MY FATHER AND *HIS* FATHER

TEMPERED IN THE BLOOD OF A THOUSAND—

HUNH!

YOU DIE *WELL* IT IS YOJR *ONLY* COMFORT

I WILL *HAVE* THE BOOK OF HELLS I WILL *HAVE* THE RING OF STAFFS

AND I WILL STEP OVER *YOUR* LIFELESS CORPSE TO GET THEM

THEN THIS CITY ***DIES.***

HA!

I NEVER *WANTED* THE DAMNED THINGS

BUT YOU WILL **NEVER** POSSESS THEM!

UNGH!

I AM BESTED

THEN YOU WILL TAKE YOUR HORSEMEN AND *LEAVE*

MORE THAN THAT

THE RING OF BLADES

MINE?

YOU *CAN'T!*

IT'S *NOT* YOURS TO WEAR, BOON!

ANOTHER IS FATED TO BE BLADE MASTER!

I *WON* IT

NOW I REALLY *AM* INVINCIBLE

REMEMBER MY NAME, ONCE GREAT KHAN

BOON SAI

NOW

THUNK THNK THUNK

UH?

TREACHERY!

THE GREAT KHAN MURDERED!

VENGEANCE!

THE CITY MUST PAY!

NO!
VENGEANCE ONLY ON THE ASSASSINS!
THUNK THUNK
THE KHAN'S ORDERS WERE FOR SINGLE COMBAT
WE HONOR HIS COMMAND
WE ASK ONLY THE RIGHT TO REMOVE OUR HEADMAN FOR BURIAL
THEN OUR ARMY WILL WITHDRAW

GRANTED

POOR BOON SAI HONG

YOU HAVE *CHOSEN* TO THWART FATE

YOUR CHOICE WILL BRING YOU MORE *PAIN* THAN POWER

I WILL PRAY THAT YOU DO NOT PAY FOR YOUR FOLLY WITH YOUR LIFE

YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED MUCH FOR AN IDIOT, BOON

SAVED YOUR CITY, SAVED YOUR EMPIRE

YOUR ENEMIES KNOW THIS IF YOUR FRIENDS DO NOT

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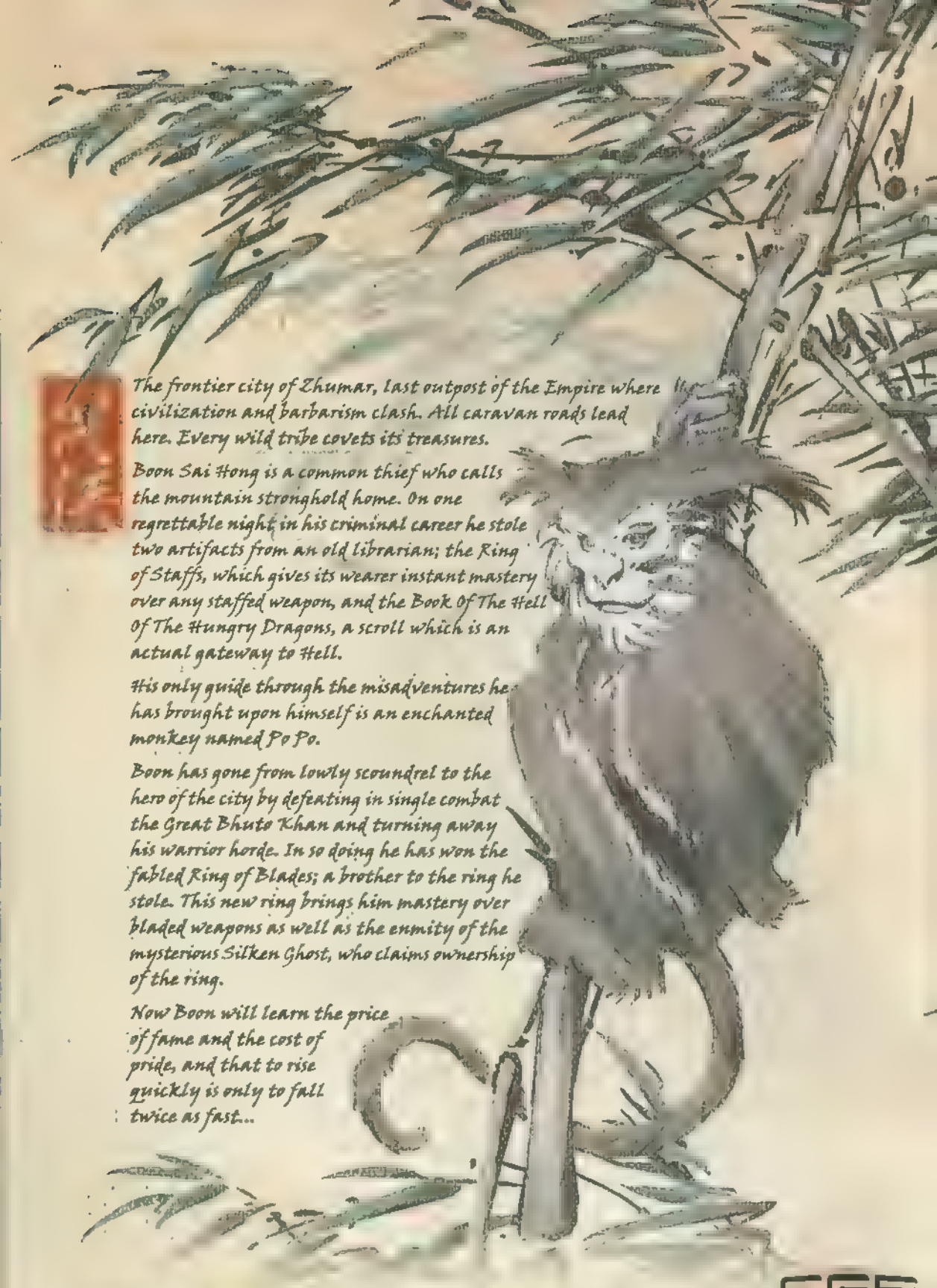

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Now Boon will learn the price of fame and the cost of pride, and that to rise quickly is only to fall twice as fast...

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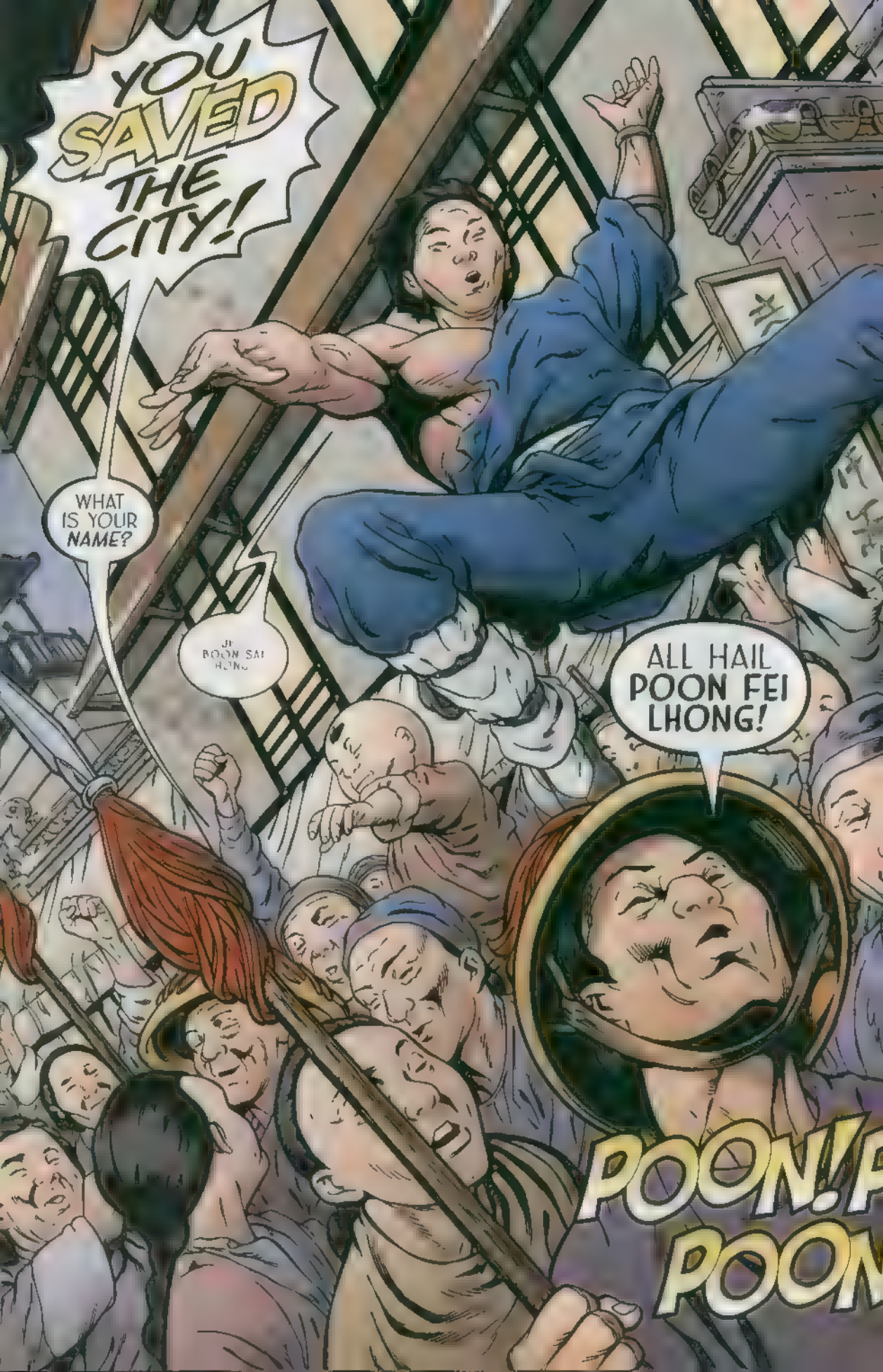
HE IS THE ONE!
GRAB HIM!
ME?
"Recall please that the damned are famous also."


YOU SAVED THE CITY!
WHAT IS YOUR NAME?
ALL HAIL POON FEI LHONG!
POON!
POON

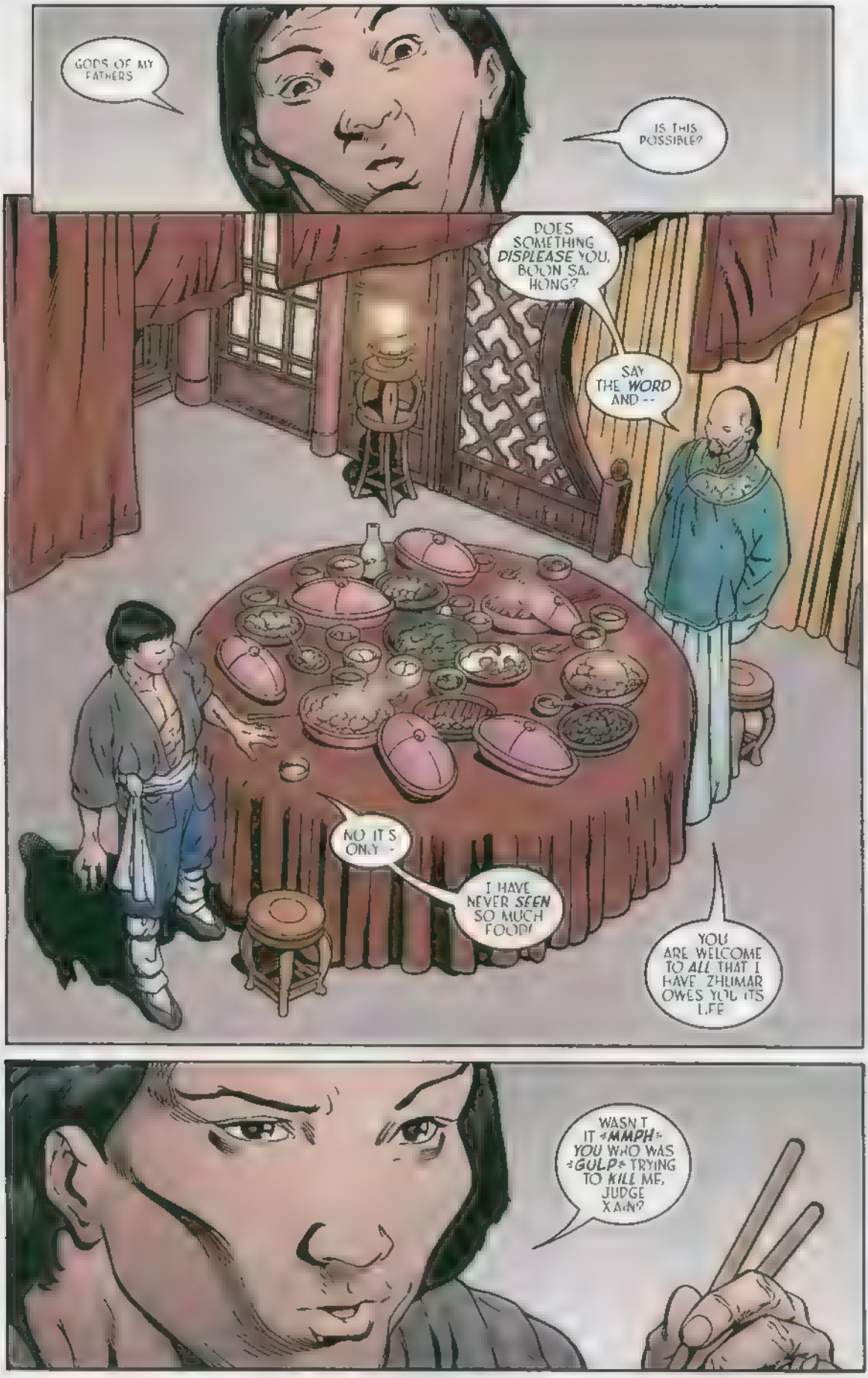
MORONS
POON!
POON!
POON!
POON
OON! POON!
POON! POO

PEOPLE OF ZHUMAR!
WE ARE DELIVERED FROM DEATH AND DISHONOR!
IN OUR GREATEST HOUR OF NEED A HERO HAS RISEN TO FACE OUR FOES!
A FIGHTING SON OF ZHUMAR A MAN OF SKILL AND DARING HE HAS SAVED US FROM THE SWORD OF THE OUTLANDERS!
YOU WOULD HONOR ME IF YOU DESIGN TO SHARE A MEAL AT MY HOME THIS EVENING
JH
YES
POON! POON!
POON! POON!

PRINCESS?
I BRING YOU TEA
PRINCESS?
WHAT IS IT TEA SU?
ONLY SOME TEA YOUR HIGHNESS
I DID NOT MEAN TO INTRUDE
NO NEED FOR APOLOGIES
I DID NOT SLEEP WELL AND SO AWOKE EARLY
WITH ALL OF THIS UNREST AND UNCERTAINTY

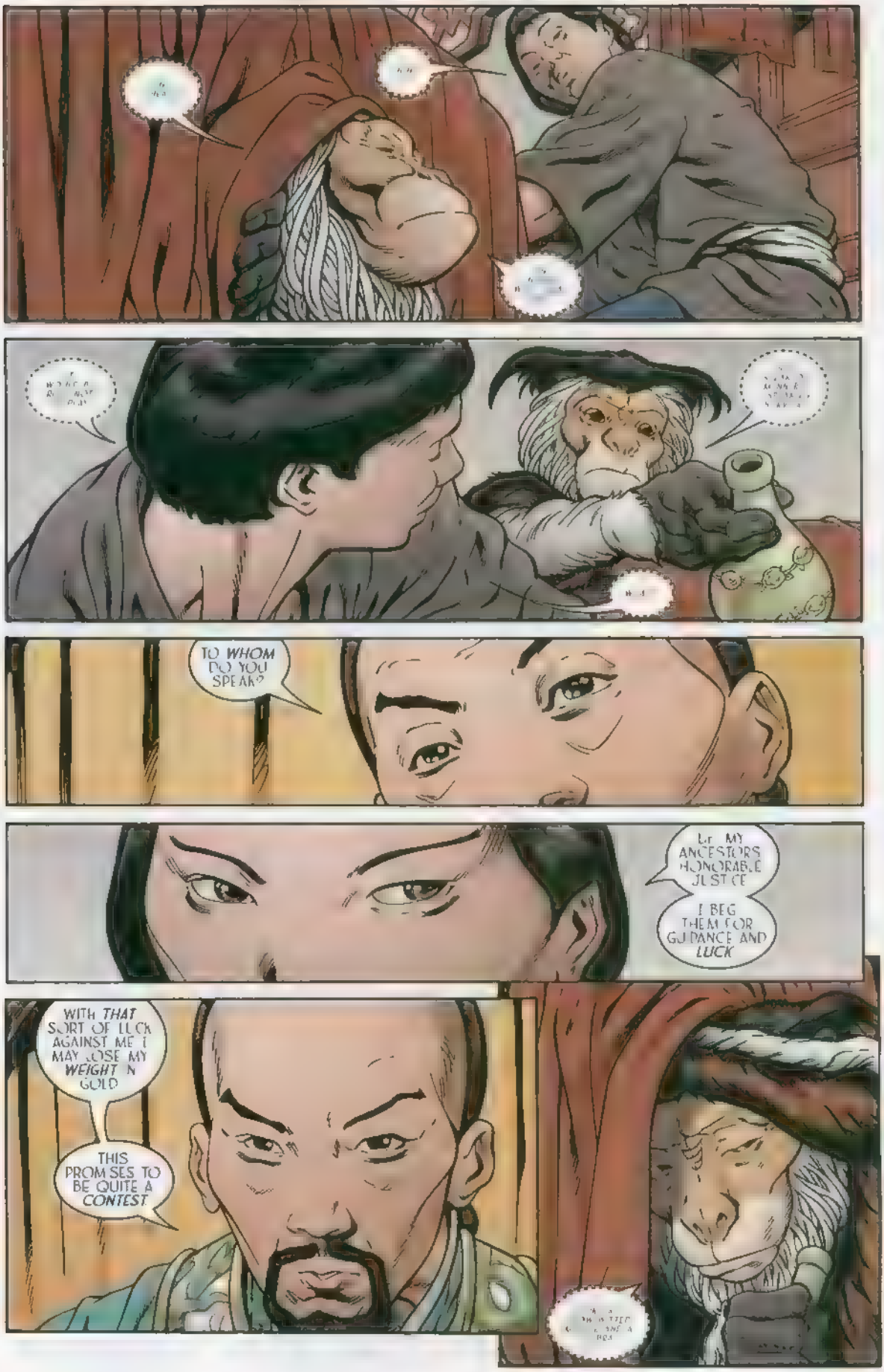
I UNDERSTAND THAT THE THIEF WHO ROBBED MY FATHER'S LIBRARY DEFEATED THE KHAN IN COMBAT
SO I HAVE HEARD AND HE NOW POSSESSES THE RING OF BLADES AS WELL
ONE MAN TO TURN BACK A HORDE
WHAT OF THE ARTIFACTS?
HE STILL HAS THEM, I SUPPOSE TO COMPLETE MY MISSION I MUST RETRIEVE THEM
HOW WILL YOU PERSUADE HIM? HE IS VERY POWERFUL
BUT A FOOL AS ALL MEN ARE FOOLS
HE WILL SURRENDER THEM TO ME
AND THEN I RETURN TO MY FATHER'S PALACE

AND LIFE MAY GO ON AS BEFORE


GODS OF MY FATHERS
IS THIS POSSIBLE?
DOES SOMETHING *DISPLEASE* YOU, BOON SA, HONG?
SAY THE *WORD* AND --
NO IT'S ONLY -
I HAVE NEVER *SEEN* SO MUCH FOOD!
YOU ARE WELCOME TO *ALL* THAT I HAVE. ZHUMAR OWES YOU ITS LIFE
WASN'T IT *MMPH* YOU WHO WAS *GULP* TRYING TO *KILL* ME, JUDGE XAIN?

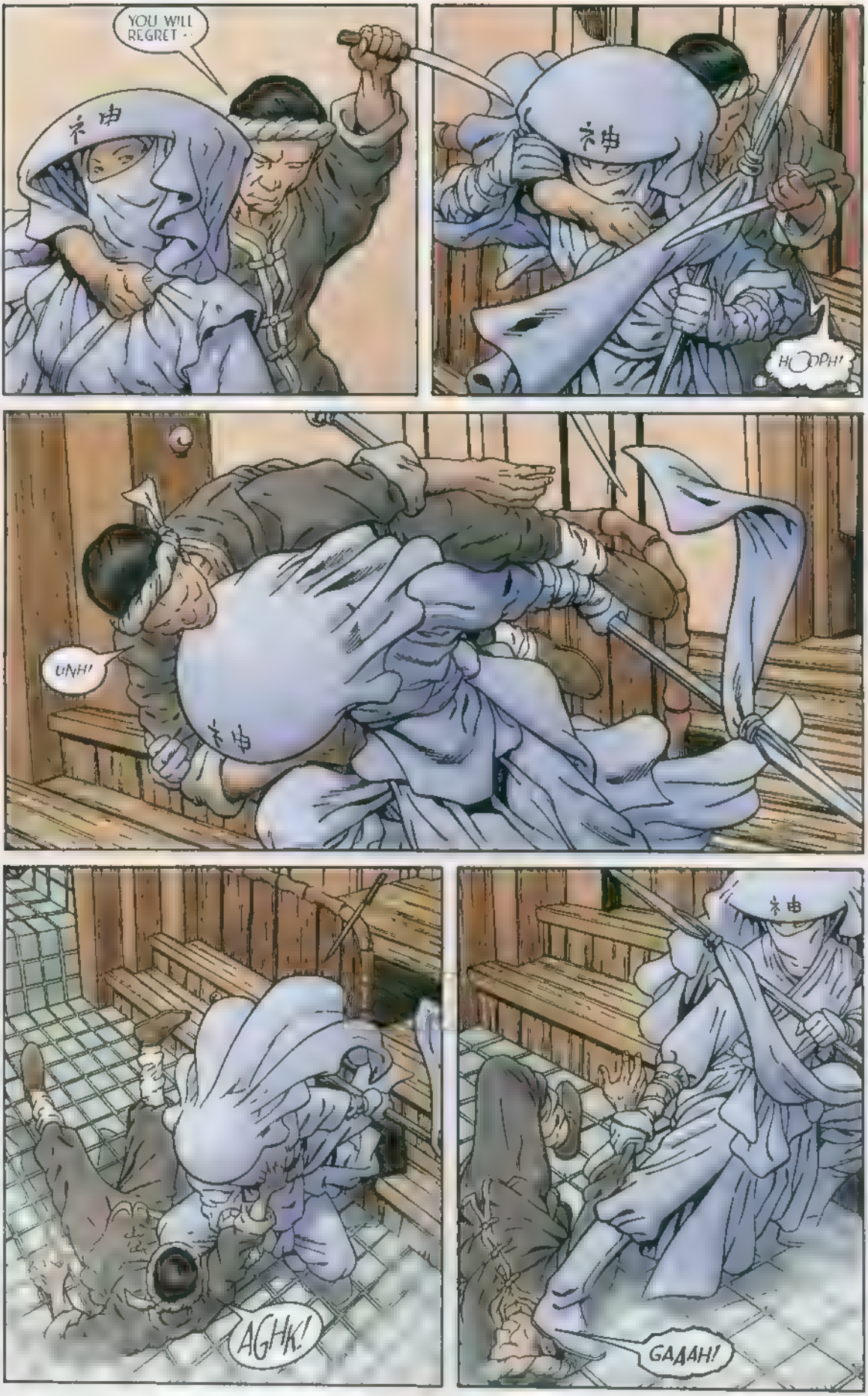
A MISUNDERSTANDING I MISTAKENLY THOUGHT YOU A CRIMINAL FOR YOUR THEFT OF THE MYSTICAL OBJECTS
I NOW REALIZE THAT FATE MEANT YOU TO HAVE THEM
BUT LET US PUT THAT BEHIND US. BOON TONIGHT IS YOUR REWARD ANY PLEASURE YOU DESIRE IS YOURS
FOOD DRINK FEMININE COMPANIONSHIP
OR PERHAPS A GAME OR TWO
DO YOU HAVE AN INTEREST IN GAMBLING?
I DO NOT LIKE THIS.

A SIMPLE GAME REALLY CHILD'S PLAY
IT LOOKS AS THOUGH YOU HAVE MASTERED IT BOON
BUT IS THE GAME ITSELF DIVERTING ENOUGH FOR ONE WHOSE MIND IS SO QUICK?
IT'S MORE COMPLEX THAN DOMINOES, JUDGE XAIN
BUT I CAN GRASP THE BASICS.
ARE YOU CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO WAGER?
PERHAPS JUDGE XAIN
BUT I AM A POOR PEASANT WHAT WOULD I--
WAGER?


TO WHOM DO YOU SPEAK?
I, MY ANCESTORS HONORABLE JUSTICE
I BEG THEM FOR GUIDANCE AND LUCK
WITH THAT SORT OF LUCK AGAINST ME I MAY LOSE MY WEIGHT IN GOLD
THIS PROMISES TO BE QUITE A CONTEST

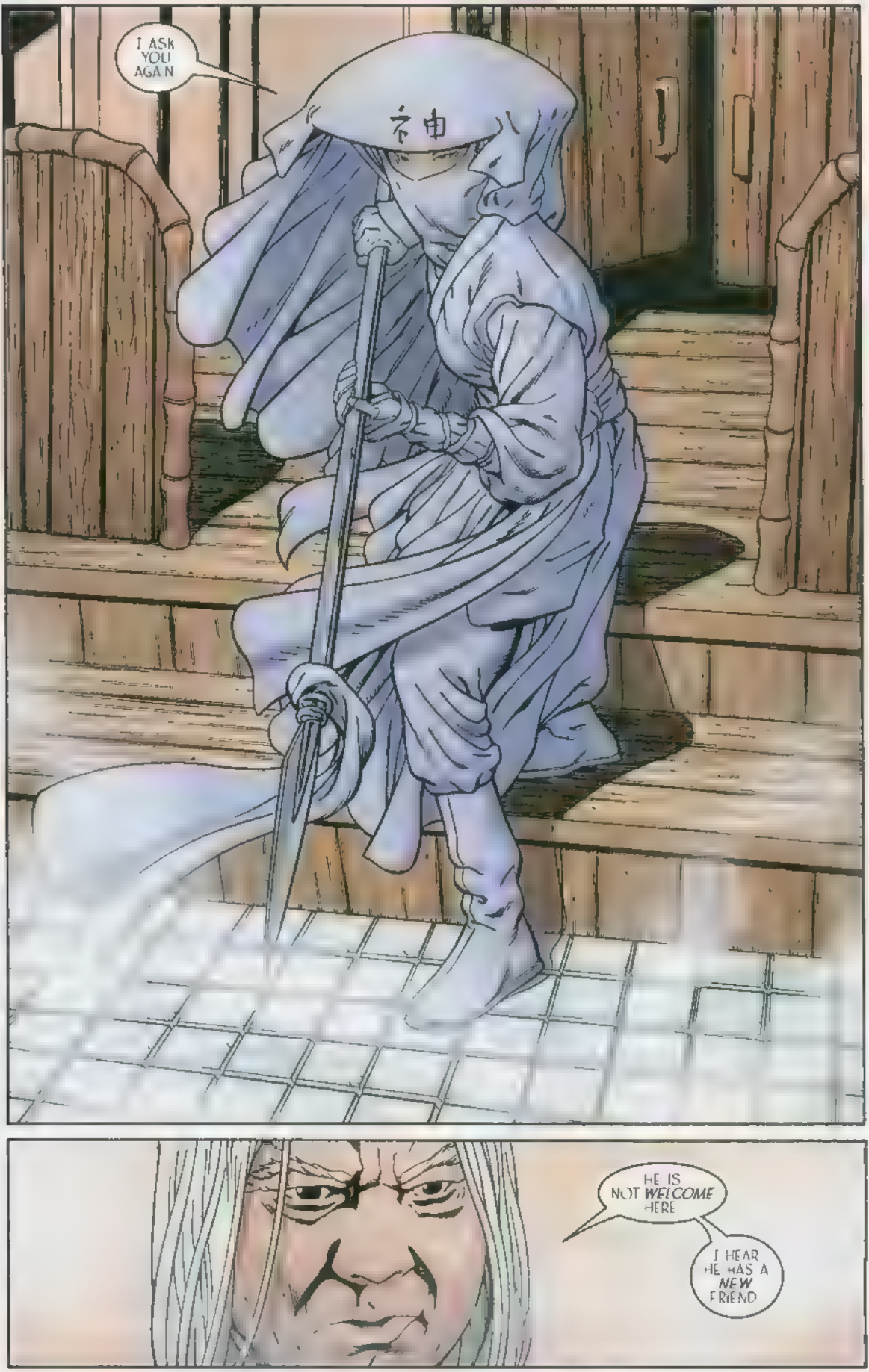
HE DEFIES THE BROTHERHOOD OF SCOUNDRELS
HE STEALS AND DOES NOT PAY TRIBUTE
HE SPITS IN THE FACE OF BOSS TIGER
AND FOR ALL OF THAT THEY MAKE HIM A HERO!
I AM SICK TO THE GUT OF HEARING HIS NAME!
SOME SOOTHING HERBS WILL SETTLE YOUR MIND
BOON SAI HONG BOON SAI HONG
PHAH!
I SEND HIM TO STEAL SOMETHING AND HE KEEPS IT!
I ASK YOU, MOTHER, IS THIS AN HONEST MAN? A HERO?
THIS WILL CALM YOU
GAAHH!

ARE THOSE HERBS TO SOOTHE ME OR FLAVOR ME, OLD WOMAN?
PHHT WHO WOULD EAT YOU? ALL FAT AND GRISTLE!
HUNH!
WHO DISTURBS MY BATH?
WHERE IS BOON SAI HONG?
AHHH! THAT NAME AGAIN!
WILL NO ONE QUIET THIS WITCH?
I WILL, BOSS TIGER!


YOU WILL REGRET · ·
HOOPH!
UNH!
AGHK!
GAAAH!

WALK AWAY
FROM YOU?!
HNH!
UFF!
GOOMPH!

YOU'LL NOT LEAVE HERE --
GAGHK!


I ASK YOU AGAIN
HE IS NOT WELCOME HERE
I HEAR HE HAS A NEW FRIEND

A DANGEROUS FRIEND
I AM AMAZED. YOU WIN AGAIN, YOUNG BOON
IF YOU HAD BUT WAGERED, YOU WOULD BE A WEALTHY MAN BY NOW
IT'S TRUE BUT I CAN'T BET THESE RINGS YOU SEE. I CAN'T GET THEM OFF MY FINGERS
IF ONLY...
OOP CLUMSY ME

→SNURRGH←
HAVE YOU SOMETHING OF VALUE, BOON?
SOME TRINKET OR CURIOSITY?
Um Well
LIKE THIS?
Ah
MOST HANDSOME A SCROLL

IT APPEARS TO BE VALUABLE I ONLY WONDER HOW YOU CAME UPON IT
PERHAPS, ONE DAY, YOU MIGHT TELL ME
BOON SAI HONG!
GO WAY RESTING
OH!
BOON SAI HONG!
YOU ARE A THIEF!
EH?

THE RING OF STAFFS! THE RING OF BLADES!
THEY WI NOT COME OFF, PRINCESS MA!
THE PHOENIX HEART, THEN!
I DON T
NO!
EEP
IF THE MONKEY COULD SPEAK
HE MIGHT TELL ME WHERE TO FIND THE PHOENIX HEART
THAT STUPID ANIMAL KNOWS NOTHING
BUT I HAVE SOMETHING ELSE

THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS
FILLED WITH UGLY PICTURES PLEASE TAKE IT!
BUT THE HEART
THIS WILL DO FOR NOW, BOON SAI HONG
YOUR SERVICE TO THE EMPIRE BUYS YOU SOME LENIENCE
MANY HUMBLE THANKS, MERCIFUL PRINCESS
BUT I WILL RETURN
STUPID ANIMAL?
A FITTING DESCRIPTION FOR YOU
SO, I AM STUPID?
WAS IT ME WHO SLEPT THROUGH LAST NIGHT'S REVELS?
WHAT HAPPENED WHILE I DOZED?
NO NEED TO WORRY YOURSELF WITH THAT, PO PO
I HAVE SOLVED ALL OF OUR PROBLEMS
I AM LIKING THIS LESS AND LESS
WHAT DID YOU DO, BOON?

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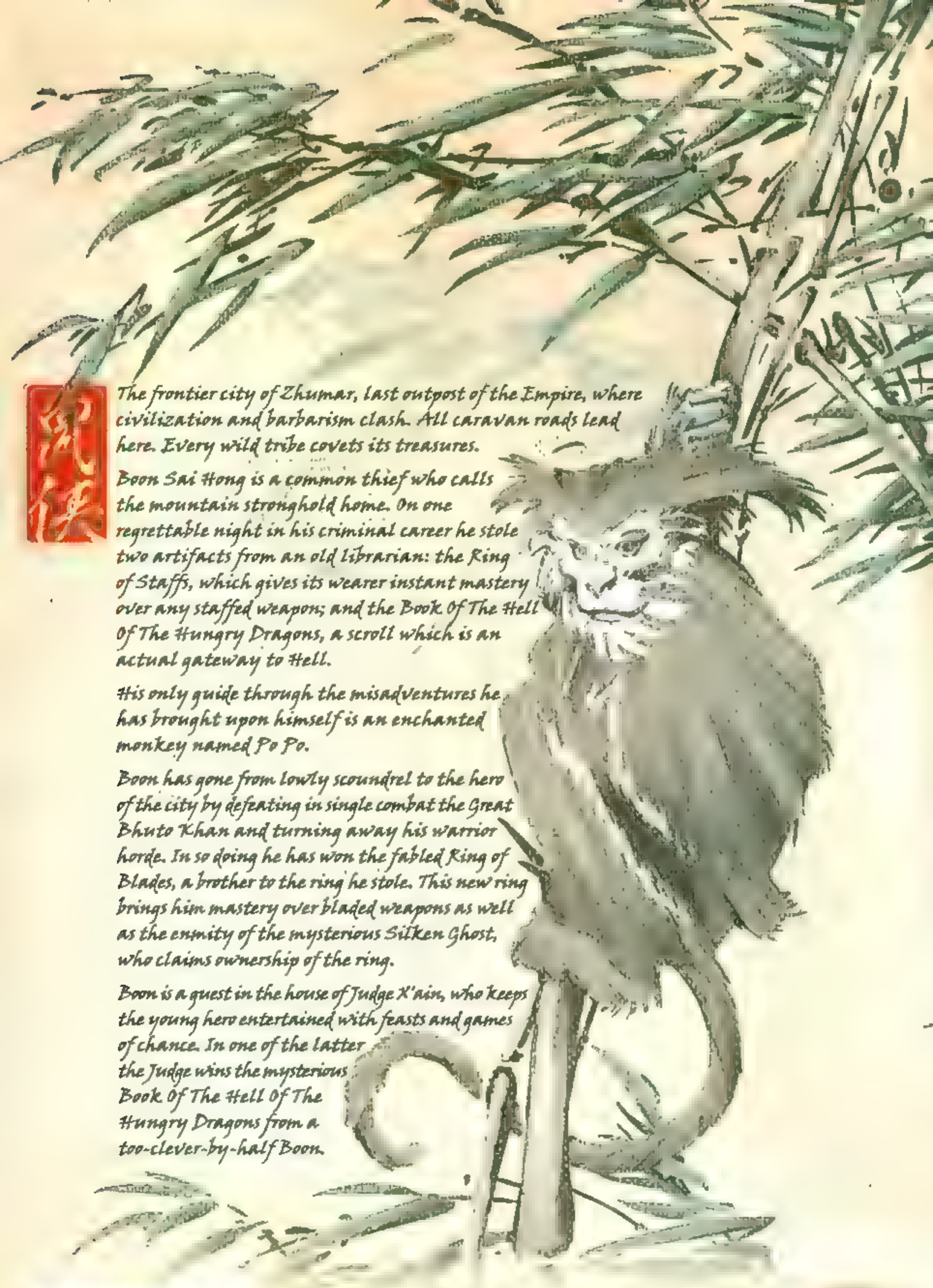

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Boon is a guest in the house of Judge X'ain, who keeps the young hero entertained with feasts and games of chance. In one of the latter the Judge wins the mysterious Book Of The Hell Of The Hungry Dragons from a too-clever-by-half Boon.

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CGE

HAVE YOU NEVER SEEN THE IMPERIAL CITY, TEI SU?
NO, PRINCESS MAI LO. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I HAVE HAD THE PLEASURE
I AM NOT CERTAIN HOW MUCH PLEASURE IT WILL PROVIDE

HOW CAN YOU *SAY* SUCH A THING, PRINCESS?

TO *MY* EYES IT IS BEAUTIFUL

TO *YOUR* EYES IT MUST SEEM MORE SO IT IS YOUR *HOME*

SOMETIMES BEAUTY IS A MASK TEI

BENEATH IS CORRUPTION AND UNCERTAINTY

"Only the dead know contentment"

Wing Tei Sun

YOU ARE NOT *HAPPY* TO RETURN THEN?

ONLY TO BRING THE SCROLL TO A PLACE OF *SAFEKEEPING*

ONCE IT IS *HIDDEN* WITHIN THE IMPERIAL LIBRARY I WILL FEEL RELIEF

RIGHT TO THE LIBRARY PRINCESS? SHOULD YOU NOT GO TO YOUR HOME AND GREET YOUR *FAMILY?*

THIS IS MORE *IMPORTANT* AND MY FAMILY'S SPIES WILL HAVE TOLD THEM OF MY RETURN

TAT SANG IMPERIAL ARCHIVIST THIS IS WING TEI SU, LIBRARIAN OF ZHUMAR

I AM *PLEASED* TO MEET A YOUNG SCHOLAR NEW TO THE TRADE OF THE WRITTEN WORD

YOU *HONOR* ME, TAT SANG

WE ARE HERE ON *DARK* BUSINESS, OLD MASTER

THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS. TREAT IT *CAUTIOUSLY* ITS IMAGES *KILLED* MY FATHER

IT IS AN *ABOMINATION*, THIS SCROLL I WILL EXAMINE IT *QUICKLY* AND THEN TO THE VAULTS

WHAT OF THE *OTHER* ARTIFACTS, PRINCESS?

THEY ARE SAFE WITH BOON SAI HONG FOR *NOW* THE SCROLL WAS THE *MOST* URGENT

AND THE RINGS?

Mm?

THE IRONY IS THAT HIS *POSSESSION* OF THEM GIVES HIM THE TALENTS TO KEEP THEM SAFE

AND THE PHOENIX HEART?

I'M STILL NOT *CERTAIN* -

Mm hm

THIS IS *NOT* THE BOOK OF HELL, PRINCESS

WHAT ARE YOU *SAYING*, TAT SANG?

IT IS A *LEGAL* DOCUMENT CONCERNING LAND OWNERSHIP

THEN WHERE *IS* IT?

YOU DID *WHAT?*

I GAMBLED THE BOOK *AWAY* TO JUDGE XAN

WHEN DID YOU DO THIS?

LAST NIGHT WHILE *YOU* WERE DRUNK

WHY WOULD EVEN *YOU* DO SOMETHING SO STUPID, BOON?

BECAUSE THE BOOK IS *DANGEROUS,* POPO

YOU SAID YOURSELF THAT IT'S A *GATEWAY* TO HELL ITSELF SO I TRICKED THE JUDGE INTO *TAKING* IT

TRICKED?

WERE THERE A *KING* OF DOTS *YOU* WOULD WEAR THE CROWN!

=UNNH!=

*AND WHAT DO YOU THINK A MAN LIKE THE JUDGE WILL **DO** WITH SUCH A BOOK?*

OW!

AND ALL I MUST DO IS READ THIS *SCROLL*, JUDGE XAIN?

FOR *THAT* YOU WILL RETURN MY DAUGHTER TO ME?

IF YOU WISH YOUR CHILD RETURNED, THEN YOU WILL INDULGE ME *WITHOUT* QUESTIONS

AND *WHY* MUST I READ IT AT THE BOTTOM OF THIS GRAIN WELL?

YOUR LOVELY CHILD COULD BE BACK IN YOUR HOME *TONIGHT*, FONG

I DO NOT *MEAN* TO GIVE OFFENSE, WISE JUSTICE

NONE *TAKEN*, MERCHANTMAN

SIMPLY READ A *FEW* PASSAGES AND YOU AND YOUR DAUGHTER WILL BE REUNITED

I AM *MOST* GRATEFUL

WHAT IS THE SUBJECT OF THIS TEXT?
IT IS OF A RELIGIOUS NATURE FONG
A STORY OF GODS AND MAGIC?
SOMETHING LIKE THAT
A SMALL ENOUGH FAVOR TO PERFORM
FOR SO HONORABLE A MAN AS YOU

THAT *FOOL!* THAT *ARROGANT,* SMIRKING *FOOL!*

YOU MUST *FORGIVE* BOON, PRINCESS.

HE DID NOT *CHOOSE* THIS DESTINY

CAN I *CURSE* FATE? CAN I PUNCH *SENSE* INTO FATE? CAN I *SCREAM* AT FATE UNTIL I AM HOARSE?

I'M NOT SURE --

THEN I *WILL* DO SO TO BOON SAI HONG!

BUT THEN, IT IS *MY* FAULT! WHY WAS I SO *FOOLISH* AS TO TRUST A THEF AND A LIAR TO GUARD SO *POWERFUL* AN OBJECT?

THERE MAY *STILL* BE TIME WE MUST RIDE *BACK* TO ZHUMAR!

Ah, PRINCESS MAI LO YOU ARE *RETURNED*

MINISTER JOON, I WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU *FURTHER,* BUT I MUST LEAVE THE CITY WITH SOME HASTE

MAY I BE SO BOLD, I FEAR THAT IS *IMPOSSIBLE,* YOUR LOVELINESS

YOU DO NOT *UNDERSTAND*. THIS MATTER IS OF GREAT URGENCY -

NOTHING SUPERCEDES THE WISHES OF HIS IMPERIAL SELF, YOUR FATHER

HE HAS SENT ME TO COMMAND YOUR *APPEARANCE* AT COURT

AND YOUR FETCHING COMRADE

BOTH OF YOU *WILL* ATTEND THE EMPEROR

THAT FATHER OF

WE ARE TO *STAY*, THEN

YES

THOUGH *HELL* ITSELF YAWNS WIDE

MY FATHER'S WORD MUST BE OBEYED

Um

The path to damnation is a crowded one
The sinful and regretful and immoral fight for footing upon the downhill road to eternal pain

Unmindful or ignorant of their fate
Unaware of the price to be paid
For greed For treachery For pride

SO TRUE

A place is saved for the most wicked
Here dragons reign upon fiery soil
Clouds of anger
Clouds of sadness

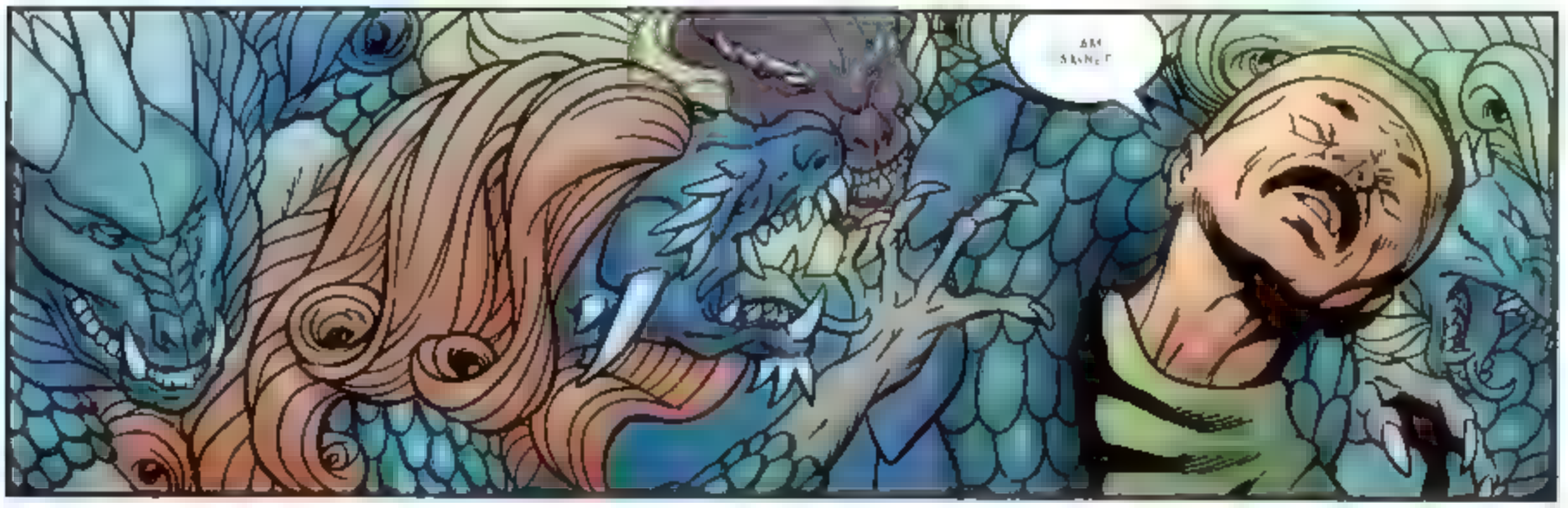
And too late

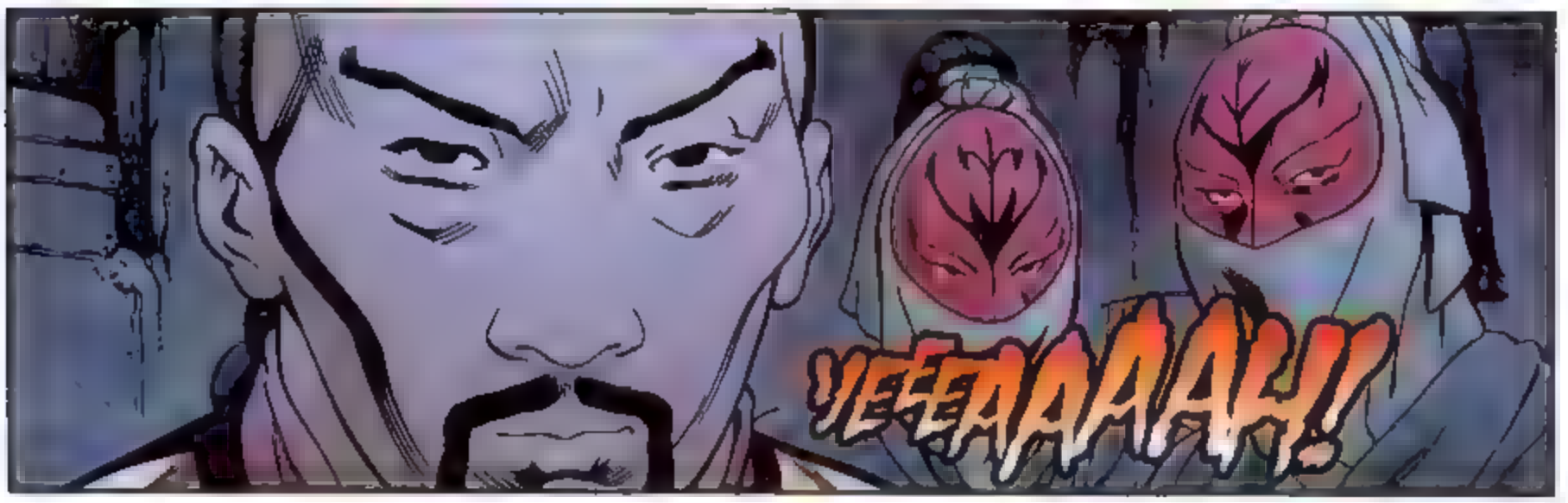
repentance

WHAT ENCHANTMENT IS THIS?

WHAT HAVE THESE WORDS WROUGHT?

JUDGE X'AIN, YOU MUST HELP ME!




YEEEAAAAH!

WHAT ARE WE TO DO, JUDGE?
KEEP WATCH UPON THIS PLACE
THIS SUMMONING OF DRAGONS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE POWER I WILL WIELD

BUT I TIRE OF TRICKERY
SIMPLE MURDER WILL BRING ME THE REST

I THOUGHT YOUR FATHER WISHED TO *SEE* YOU, PRINCESS

THE EMPEROR SEES *MANY* PEOPLE IN HIS DAILY BUSINESS

SUPPLICANTS AMBASSADORS MERCHANTS, GENERALS

ALL WANT HIS EAR

BUT SURELY HE HAS *YOUR* HEART YOU ARE HIS *CHILD*

IT IS MY *BROTHERS* HE DOTES ON TEI SU I AM WORTHY *ONLY* OF RUNNING ERRANDS

I WILL BE JUDGED BY WHO I *MARRY* BY MYSELF I AM *NOTHING* TO HIM

PERHAPS IT IS BEST ONE OF MY STATION NOT *HEAR* THIS PRINCESS

NOT *SO*, TEI SU HERE WE ARE *EQUALS* IN MY FATHER'S EYES

KILL HIM

Wrah?

Oo?

JUDGE XAIN? WHAT *IS* THIS?

I W..L *HAVE* THE RINGS YOUNG BOON SA.. HONG

EVEN IF I MUST *CUT* THE FINGERS FROM YOUR DEAD HAND

BUT YOU HAVE *WELCOMED* ME!

I AM A *GUEST* IN YOUR HOUSE

ONLY TO *LULL* YOU INTO COMPLACENCY

ONLY TO CATCH YOU IN A MOMENT OF *WEAKNESS* WITH NEITHER *STAFF* NOR *BLADE* AT HAND

*ANY*THING MAY BE A STAFF JUDGE

YA!

Uh?

THIS IS MY FIRST TRIP TO THE IMPERIAL CITY

BUT NOT YOJR FIRST TO *SHINACEA,* eh?

I VE TRAVELED HERE *MANY* A TIME MINISTER JOON

PLEASE, *NO* NAMES

AND YOU SPEAK *REASONABLY* WELL FOR A FOREIGN DEVIL YOUR ACCENT IS *REPULSIVE*

SO LONG AS YOU TAKE MY *MEANING,* S.R

I SAIL FOR PROFIT ONLY, NOT *TUTELAGE* IN SPEAKING *YOUR* HEATHEN TONGUE

I TRUST YOU WERE ABLE TO MAKE PORT *WITHOUT* INTERFERENCE?

I PRAY YOU RECALL THAT *SECRECY* WAS OF GREAT MPORT IN THIS TRANSACTION

DISCRETION COMES AT A *PRICE*, SIR

IT S *MY* HEAD THAT WOULD ADORN THE EMPEROR S WALL BESIDE YOURS

I CAUTION YOU TO REMEMBER THAT *AFTER* OUR BUSINESS S CONCLUDED

THE EMPEROR HAS *MANY* EARS AND EYES

TRUST ME ON *THAT* SCORE, SIR

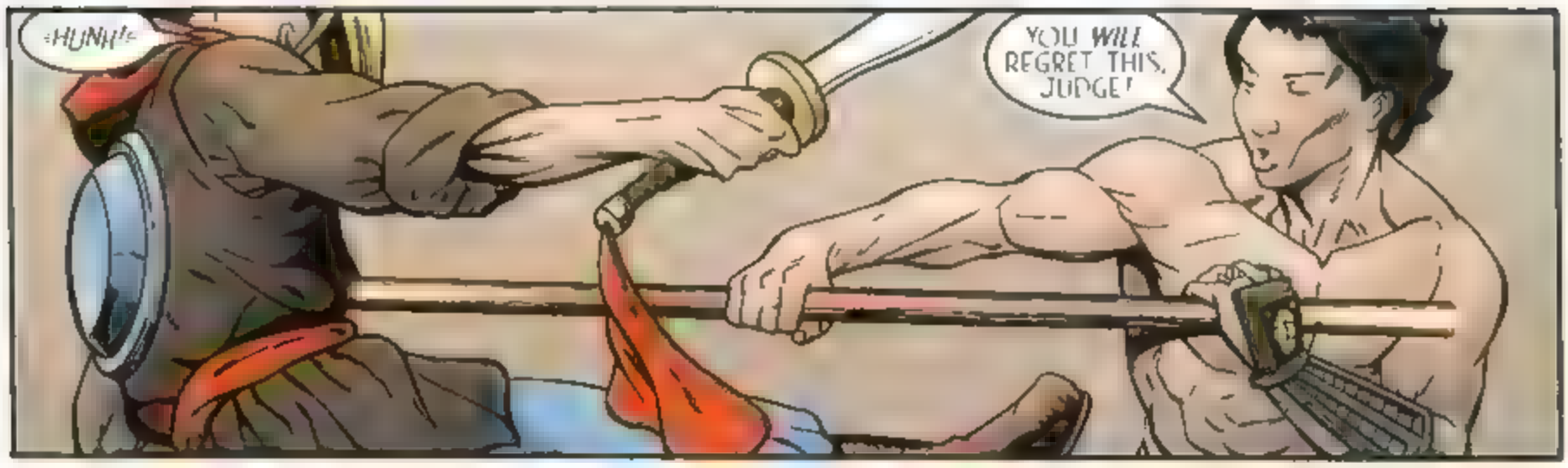
I VE NO CAUSE TO WANT MY GOOD NAME SULLIED BY CONNECTION WITH *THIS* CARGO

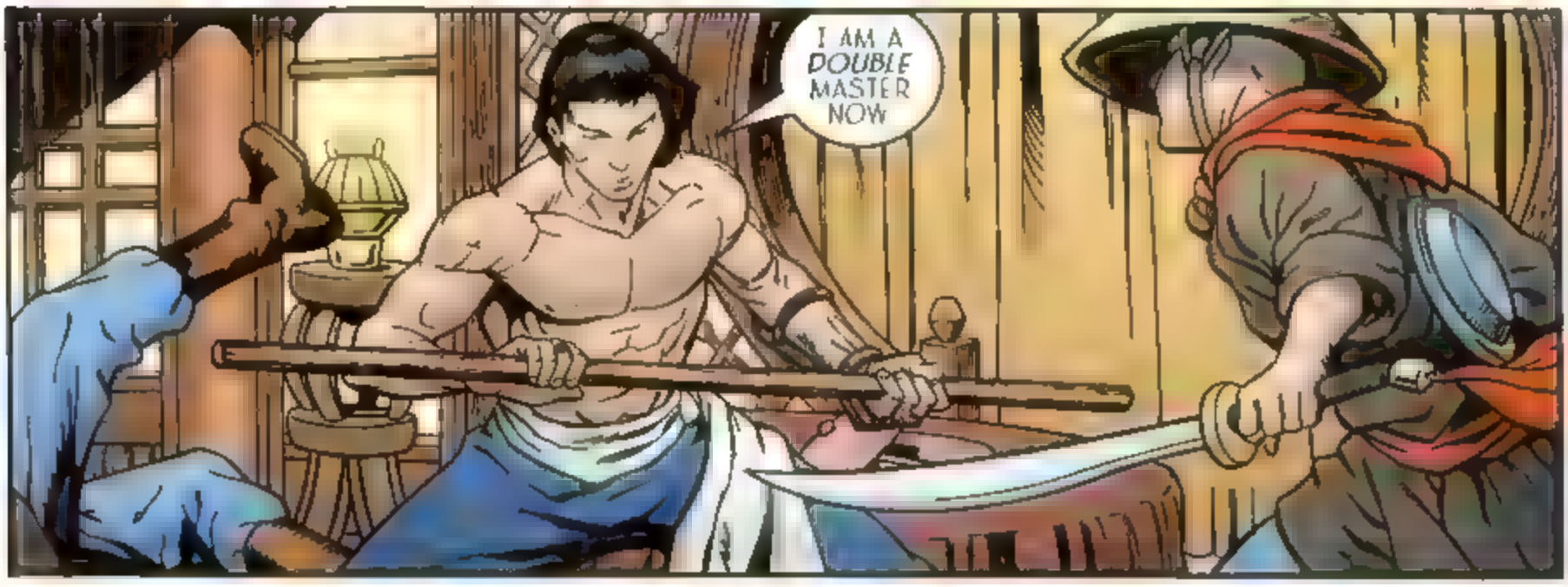
GUARDS!

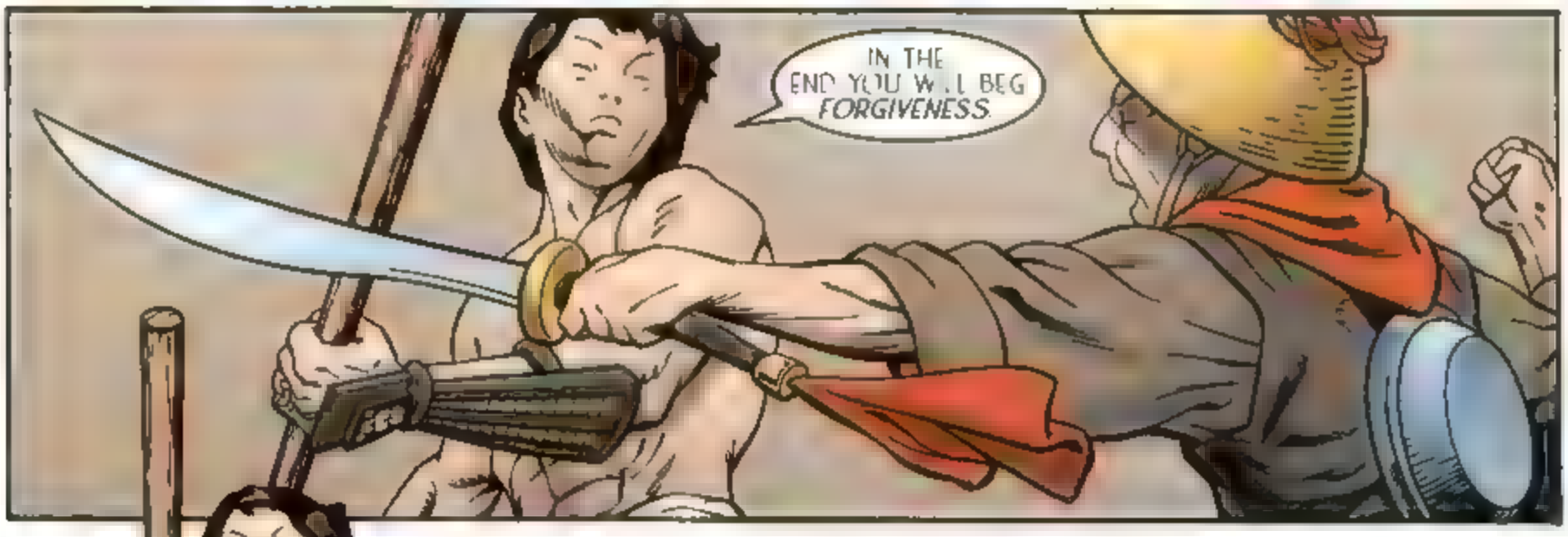
MORE GUARDS!

UFF!

HA!


HUNH!
YOU WILL REGRET THIS, JUDGE!


I AM A DOUBLE MASTER NOW


IN THE END YOU WILL BEG FORGIVENESS

AND NO NUMBER OF YOUR RETAINERS WILL CHANGE THAT

WHAT CAN YOU *SEE?*

DRAGONS *MANY* DRAGONS

BUT NOT SO MANY AS *BEFORE*

WHAT ARE YOU *SAYING?*

FEWER DRAGONS?

FEWER DRAGONS BUT *LARGER* DRAGONS.

THEY EAT ONE ANOTHER AND GROW FATTER

Oooooh

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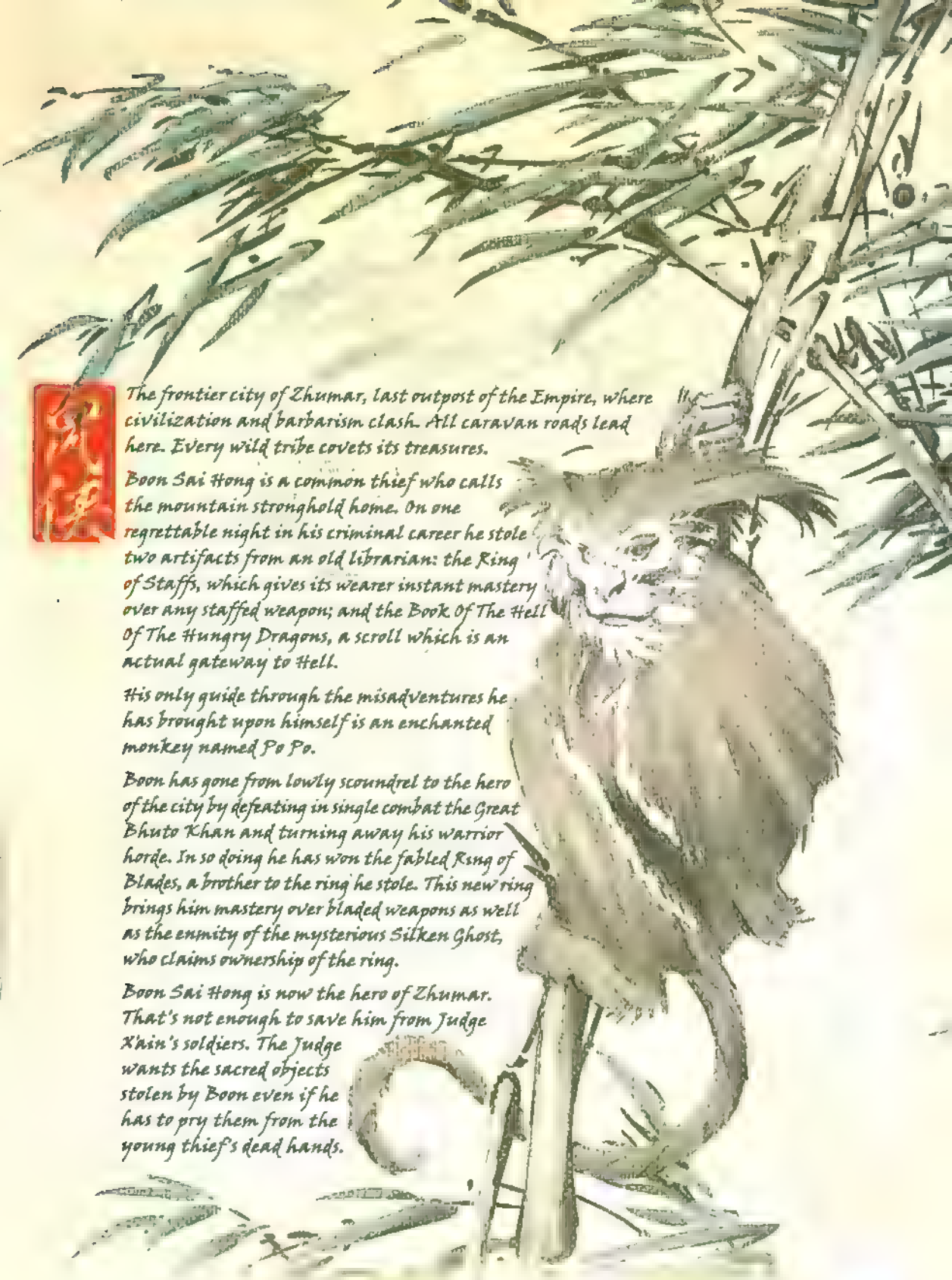
一是道
恰向
抗
足处的和懊和
道德的战斗在向永
恒痛苦的下坡路 或无
知对他们的命运 未察
觉这个价格被支付贪婪
CHUCK DIXON
LUKE ROSS
DREW GERACI
CHRIS GARCIA



The frontier city of Zhumar, last outpost of the Empire, where civilization and barbarism clash. All caravan roads lead here. Every wild tribe covets its treasures.

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His only guide through the misadventures he has brought upon himself is an enchanted monkey named Po Po.

Boon has gone from lowly scoundrel to the hero of the city by defeating in single combat the Great Bhuto Khan and turning away his warrior horde. In so doing he has won the fabled Ring of Blades, a brother to the ring he stole. This new ring brings him mastery over bladed weapons as well as the enmity of the mysterious Silken Ghost, who claims ownership of the ring.

Boon Sai Hong is now the hero of Zhumar. That's not enough to save him from Judge Xain's soldiers. The Judge wants the sacred objects stolen by Boon even if he has to pry them from the young thief's dead hands.

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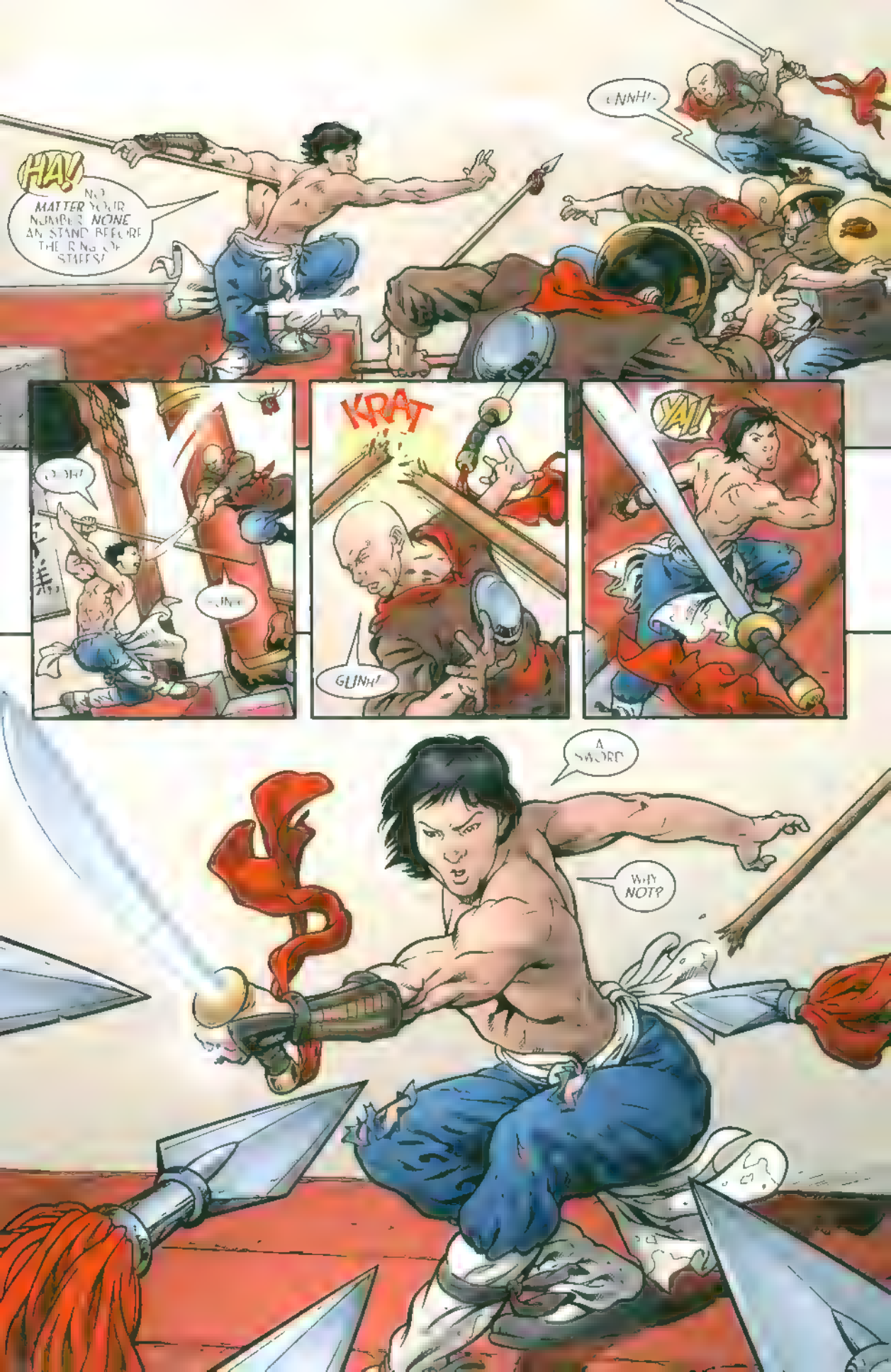
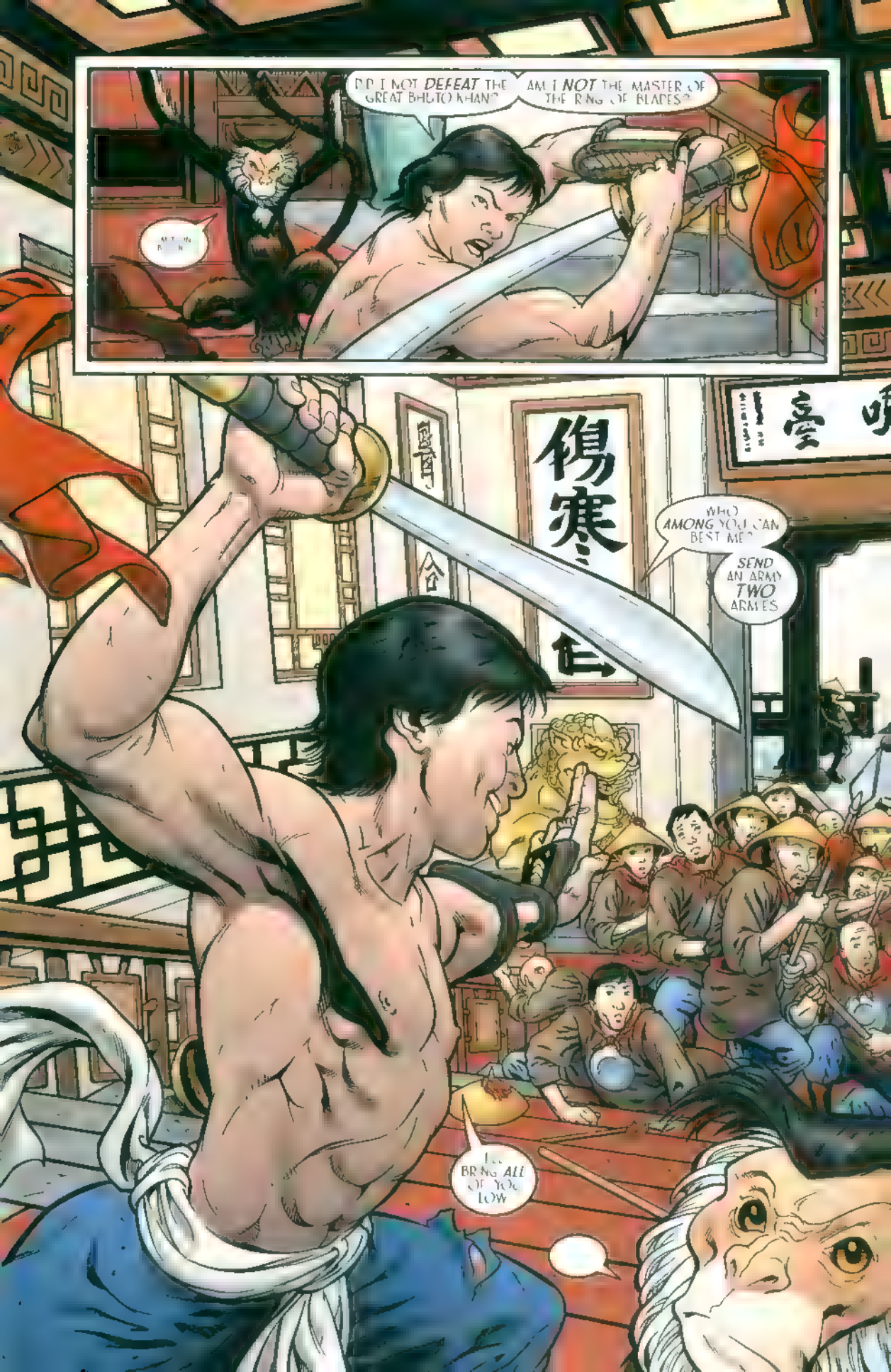
I AM A GUEST IN THE HOUSE OF JUDGE XAIN!
I AM THE SAVIOR OF ZHUMAR
IS THIS HOW YOU TREAT A
金
金
昭國字鮮

"Glory is as the wind.
Who can know from which
direction it will come.
Who can know where it
goes when it has passed."

Wing Tei Sun

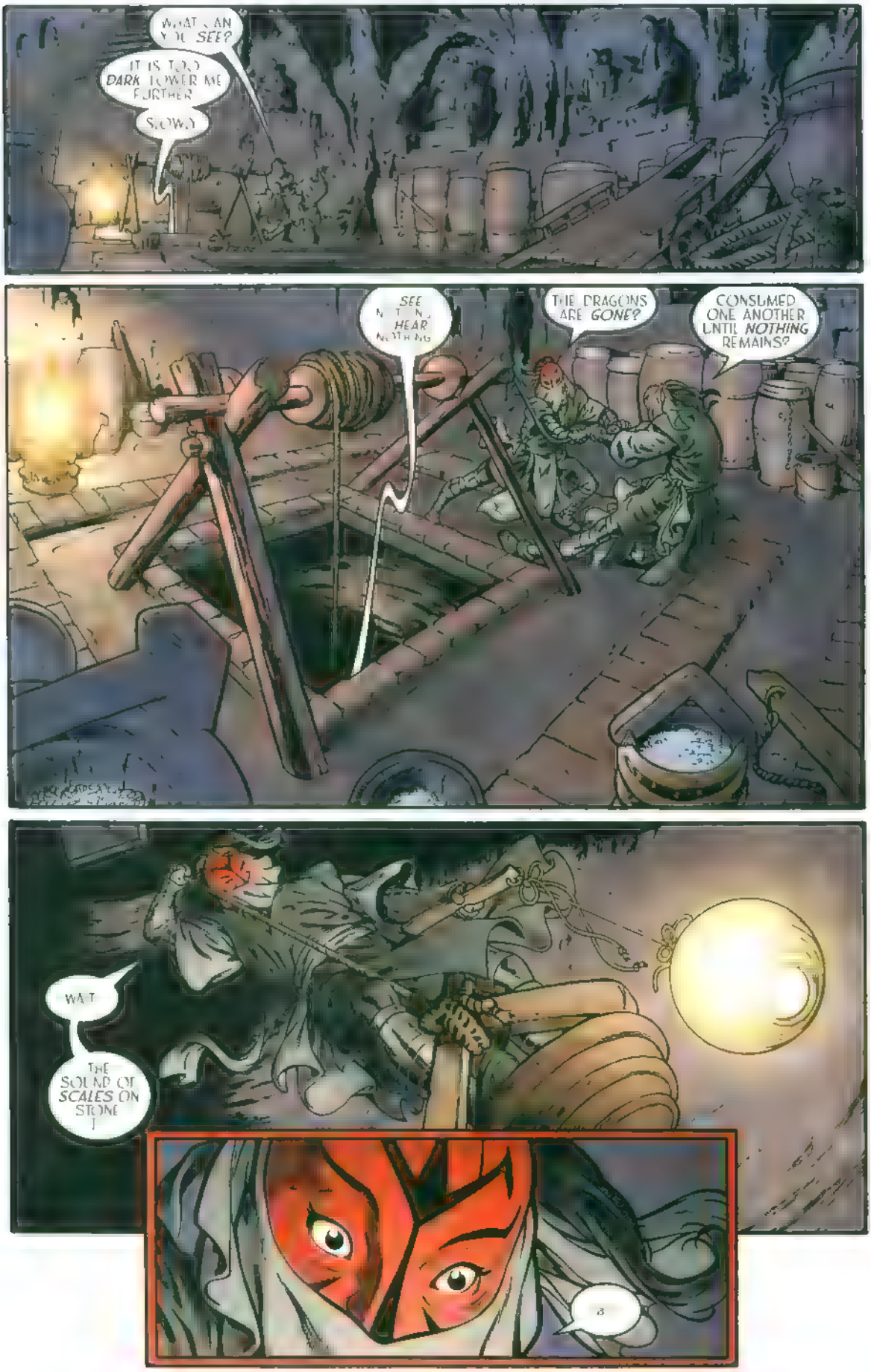
GET OFF - MY LEG, YOU CHATTERING VERMIN!
GRRR
RR TATING PEST!
THAT ONE! KILL THAT ONE!
HE IS A TRAITOR AND A THIEF!
I SAID
RELEASE ME
STINKING BEAST!
HEE! HEE!
DAMNED ANIMAL!

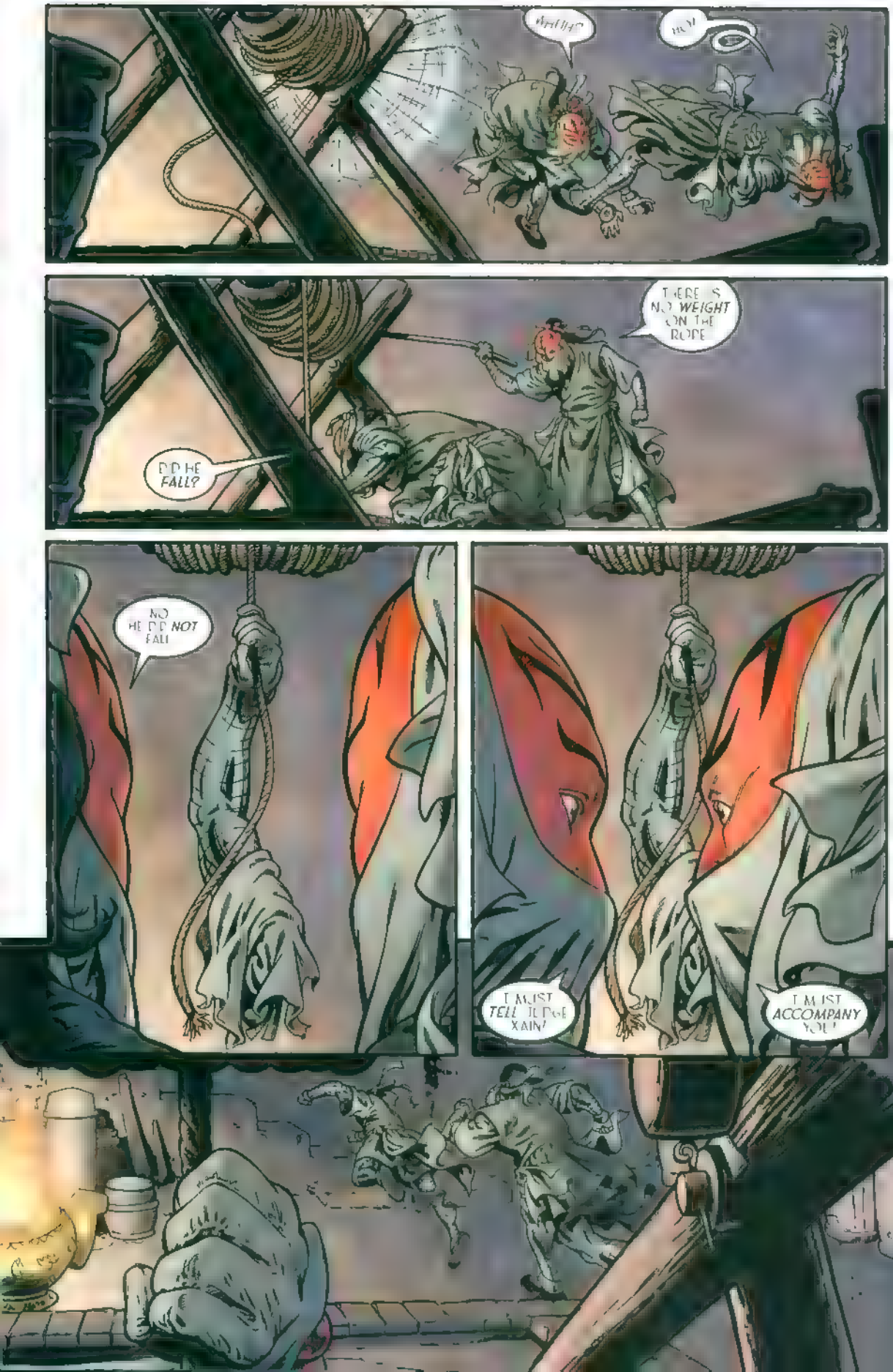

HA!
NO MATTER YOUR NUMBER NONE AN STAND BEFORE THE RING OF STAFFS!
KRAT
GUNH!
YA!
A SWORD
WHY NOT?

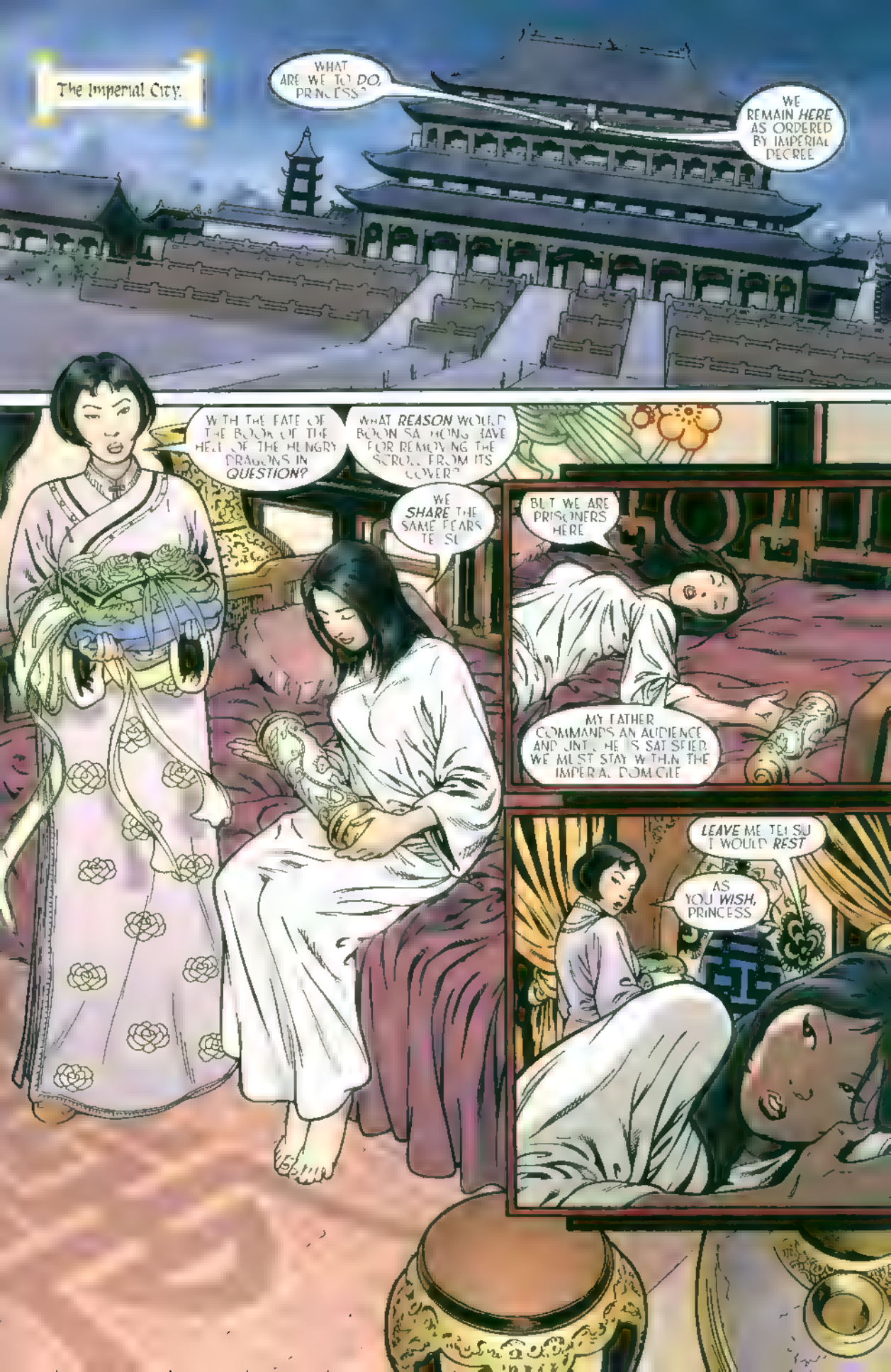

DID I NOT DEFEAT THE GREAT BHUTO KHAN?
AM I NOT THE MASTER OF THE RING OF BLADES?
WHO AMONG YOU CAN BEST ME?
SEND AN ARMY TWO ARMIES
I... BRING ALL OF YOU LOW

The Imperial City.
THE HOURS OF AUDIENCE ARE AT AN END!
HIS AUGUST SELF RETIRES FOR THE DAY!
MY HEARTFELT REGRETS, PRINCESS MAI
AN ENTIRE DAY OF WAITING AND THE EMPEROR HAS NOT SEEN YOU.
IT IS TO BE EXPECTED, TEH SU
MY FATHER IS BUSY WITH THE AFFAIRS OF AN EMPIRE
BUT HIS IMPERIAL SELF REQUESTED YOUR PRESENCE
HOW CAN HE TREAT HIS OWN DAUGHTER SO?
BECAUSE I AM HIS DAUGHTER
BUT I WILL REACH HIS EAR WITH WHAT I HAVE LEARNED

EVEN IF HE REFUSES TO HEAR IT
FOOLS AND SONS OF FOOLS!
YOU HAVEN'T EVEN TOUCHED ME!
AND I DON'T EVEN USE THE EDGE OF MY BLADE
WITH THE FLAT OF THIS BLADE I MOCK YOU ALL
QUIET, PO PO. THERE IS NOTHING I FEAR WITH THIS POWER UNDER MY COMMAND
I WANT THE JADE RAT DEAD!
O-


WHAT CAN YOU SEE?
IT IS TOO DARK TO SEE ME FURTHER
SLOWLY
SEE NOTHING
HEAR NOTHING
THE DRAGONS ARE GONE?
CONSUMED ONE ANOTHER UNTIL NOTHING REMAINS?
WAIT
THE SOUND OF SCALES ON STONE
I
3


AHHHH!
THERE IS NO WEIGHT ON THE ROPE
DID HE FALL?
NO HE DID NOT FALL
I MUST TELL THE DOGE AGAIN!
I MUST ACCOMPANY YOU!


The Imperial City.
WHAT ARE WE TO DO, PRINCESS?
WE REMAIN HERE AS ORDERED BY IMPERIAL DECREE.
WITH THE FATE OF THE BOOK OF THE HEART OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS IN QUESTION?
WHAT REASON WOULD BOON SA HONG HAVE FOR REMOVING THE SCROLL FROM ITS COVER?
WE SHARE THE SAME FEARS TE SU
BUT WE ARE PRISONERS HERE
MY FATHER COMMANDS AN AUDIENCE AND UNTIL HE IS SATISFIED WE MUST STAY WITHIN THE IMPERIAL DOMICILE
LEAVE ME TEI SU I WOULD REST
AS YOU WISH, PRINCESS

REST WITH AN UNTROUBLED HEART
I CANNOT SEE THEM!
NO! NO!
FIRE N VOLLEY! HE CANNOT DEFLECT THEM ALL!
IS HE RIGHT? IS THERE A LIMIT TO MY ABILITIES?
IT WAS INTERESTING TO KNOW YOU'D N ANY CAN
THAT SOUND
THUNDER FROM A CLEAR SKY?

WHOA! WHAT'S HAPPENING?

AN EARTHQUAKE?
AN ANGRY GOD?
T MATTERS?
RUN!
MY HOUSE!
MY BEAUTIFUL HOUSE!
IS THIS THE DESTRUCTION OF ZHUMAR?
IT'S THE SALVATION OF YOU, YOUNG FOOL!
NOW, LET'S FIND A PLACE TO HIDE FROM THE JUDGE AND HIS SOLDIERS.

The Imperial City.

神

Hen

HEH HEH HEH

神

HAHA HAHA!

MY GUARDS AND RETAINERS ALLOW THE JADE RAT TO ESCAPE ONCE *MORE*

AND TREMORS THREATEN TO *RAZE* MY HOME

A MOST *INAUSPICIOUS* DAY FOR ME

REVEAL YOURSELVES

WHY ARE YOU *NOT* IN THE GRANARY?

HONORABLE JUSTICE XAN

THERE IS A *PROBLEM*

WITH THE *DRAGONS*

A VERY *TERRIBLE* DEVELOPMENT

ONE YOU MUST BE MADE AWARE OF
YOU DARE COME HERE?
AFTER ALL YOU HAVE DONE TO DISHONOR ME?
BOSS TIGER, I MEANT NO OFFENSE TO YOU OR THE BROTHERHOOD OF SCOUNDRELS
THIS HAS BEEN A MISTAKE FROM THE BEGINNING
MISTAKE!
MISTAKE!
PLEASE, BOSS TIGER!
THUD

TO THE CITY YOU ARE A HERO! BUT I KNOW YOU BETTER! A LIAR! A CHEAT!
LEAVE BOON ALONE HE MEANT YOU NO OFFENSE
DO NOT MEDDLE IN MY AFFAIRS PO PO
DO NOT SPEAK TO ME THAT WAY TIGER!
I FED YOU AND CLOTHED YOU FROM A CHILD!
OW!
OOW!
THE GODS OF THE EARTH TREMBLE ONCE MORE!
OH!

THE WORLD IS *UNBALANCED* AND MUST BE RIGHTED

YOU SAY THE DRAGONS ARE *CONSUMING* ONE ANOTHER?

THERE WERE *MANY* THEN *LESS* AND THEN *STILL* LESS

SO. HOW MANY DRAGONS *REMAIN?*

ONLY *ONE,* ESTEEMED JUSTICE

ONE *LARGE* ONE

A *VERY* LARGE ONE

WHAT HAVE I DONE?

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At the hand of Judge X'ain, a dragon has been loosed upon Zhumar.

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WHAT IS IT PRINCESS ZHENG?
THE CITY OF ZHUMAR SOMETHING IS WRONG, TERRIBLY WRONG

"If you wish for dragons, dragons may be yours."

Wang Tai Sun

A *FIRE*? HAVE THE KHAN'S HORDES *RETURNED* FOR VENGEANCE?

I *SEE* NO ARMY I *HEAR* NO CANNON

THE THREAT COMES FROM *WITHIN* THE WALLS

THIS IS THE *PREMONITION* THAT DREW ME HERE FROM THE IMPERIAL CITY

A *CALAMITY* FALLS ON ZHUMAR THAT WILL CONSUME IT IF NOT CHECKED

IT S BOON SA HONG HE TRICKED ME NOW THE C.TY AND ITS PEOPLE PAY THE PRICE
FOR THE THEFT OF THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS
YES TEI THE SCROLL THAT KILLED YOUR FATHER MAY DOOM ZHUMAR
F BOON LIVES HE WILL PAY FOR HIS ARROGANCE
E THER AT MY HANDS OR IN THE TORTURE ROOMS OF MY FATHER
WHAT ARE WE TO DO, PRINCESS?
WE FIND BOON
THAT SHOULD BE AN EASY TASK

WE WILL BE CLOSE TO THE HEART OF THE CHAOS HE CREATED
WE ARE DOOMED! DOOMED!
THIS CANNOT BE
IT IS YOUR STUPIDITY HAS RISEN TO LEGENDARY PROPORTIONS, BOON
UNTIL THIS MOMENT YOU WERE ONLY A DANGER TO YOURSELF

NOW YOU WILL DESTROY THE *WORLD*

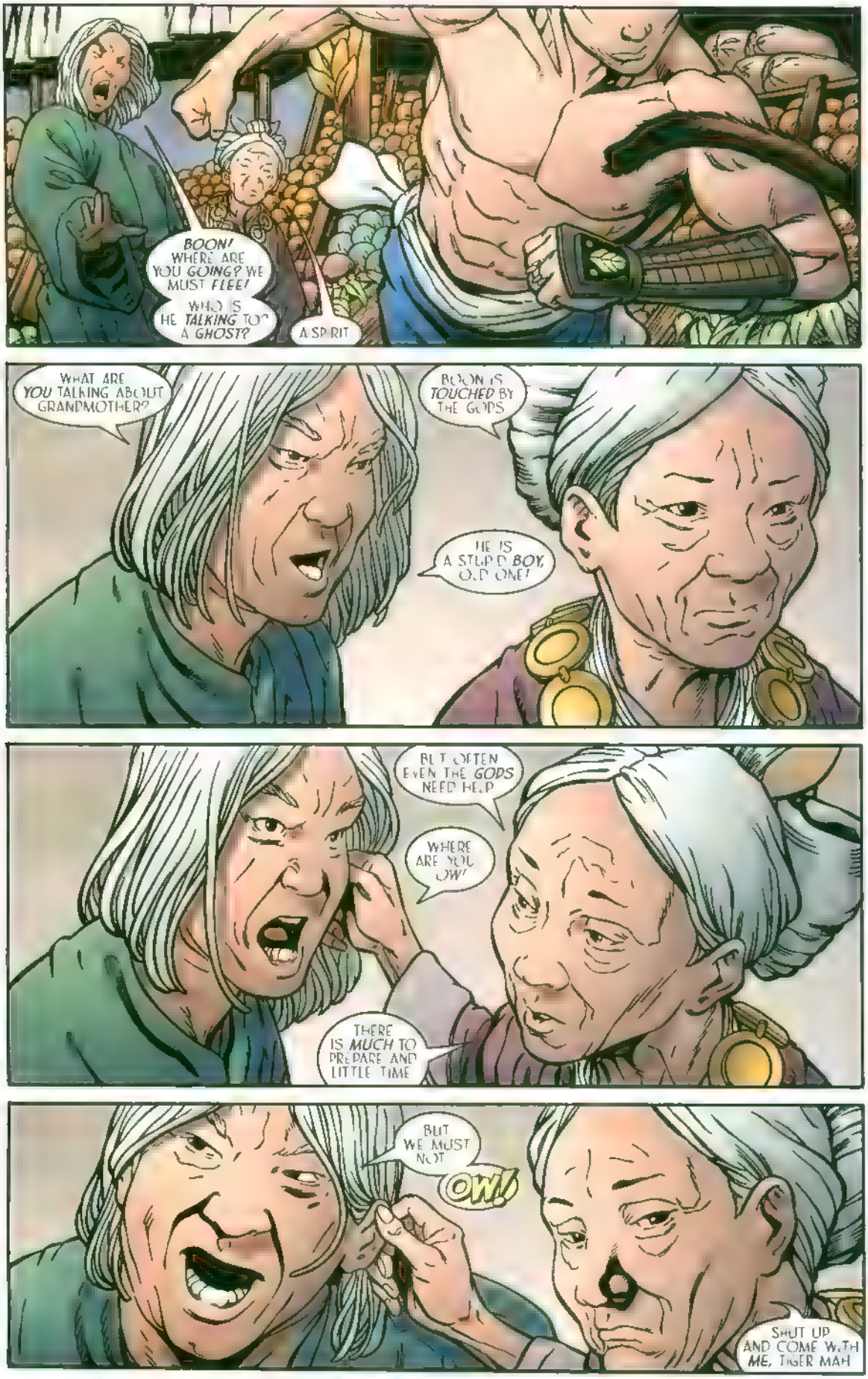
A *DRAGON*

AN *EMPEROR* DRAGON A *SINGULAR* BREED

NOTHING IS SO DANGEROUS AS A *FOOL* WHO THINKS HE IS CLEVER

WE FACE ANNIHILATION AND YOU *PHILOSOPHIZE?*

THIS IS YOUR FAULT IDIOT
MY FAULT? HOW IS A DRAGON MY FAULT?
THE JUDGE YOU LET HIM HAVE THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS
I THOUGHT THE DRAGONS STAYED IN THE BOOK
AND A DRAGON STEPPED THROUGH?
THE BOOK IS NOT MERELY A BOOK IT IS A GATEWAY
AND YOU MUST STOP IT
ME?
YOU WEAR THE RINGS ONLY YOU HAVE THE POWER
STUPID RINGS
STUPID YOU YOU ARE NOT WORTHY OF THEM
BUT SOMETIMES FATE IS BLIND


BOON! WHERE ARE YOU GOING? WE MUST FLEE!
WHO IS HE TALKING TO? A GHOST?
A SPIRIT
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT GRANDMOTHER?
BOON IS TOUCHED BY THE GODS
HE IS A STUPID BOY, O.D ONE!
BUT OFTEN EVEN THE GODS NEED HELP
WHERE ARE YOU OW!
THERE IS MUCH TO PREPARE AND LITTLE TIME
BUT WE MUST NOT
OW!
SHUT UP AND COME WITH ME, TIGER MAH

MY HOME

MY VALUABLES

ALL GONE

ALL I HAVE HUNGERED AND STRIVED AND FOUGHT FOR

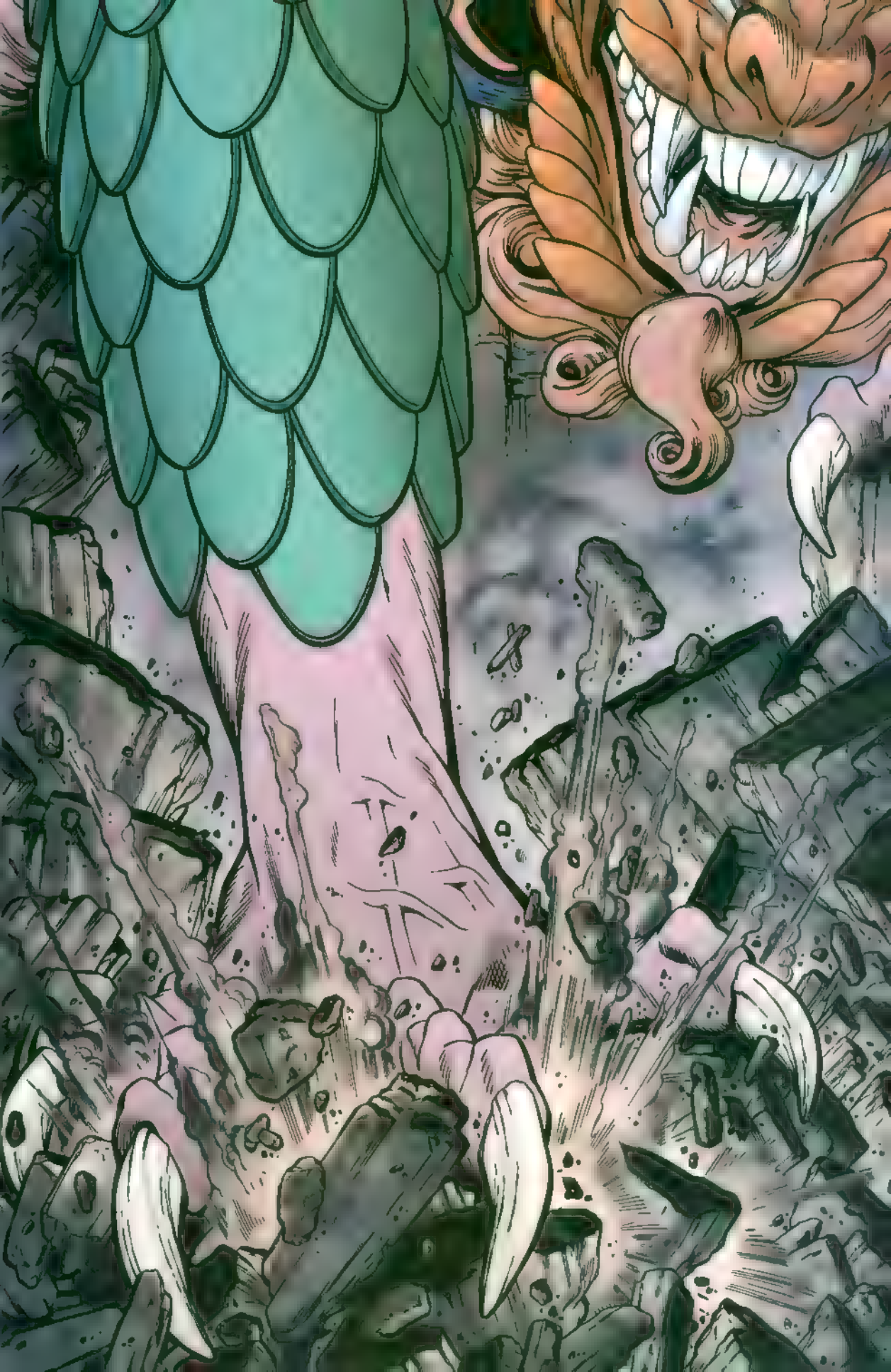
JUDGE XAIN! WE MUST BE AWAY!

WE CANNOT PROTECT YOU!

WHO MAY PROTECT A MAN FROM HIS OWN PRIDE?

WHAT I CALLED TO LIFE WILL END MY OWN

THERE IS *JUSTICE* FOR THE LAWMAKER



A BLADE
A BLADE
I NEED A BLADE
STOP THERE!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING PEASANT?
I NEED A SWORD TO BATTLE THE DRAGON!
DO I LOOK A FOOL?
I AM BOON SAI HONG, THE HERO OF ZHUMAR
YOU LOOK NOTHING LIKE HIM
HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?
I WAS THERE WHEN POON FEI HONG DEFEATED THE KHAN
BUT IT WAS ME!
LIAR!
IT IS YOU WHO LIE!
I DO NOT!

GIVE HIM THE SWORD, IDIOT!
YOU HAVE A STRATEGY, I SUPPOSE?
I AM GOING TO RUSH TO WHERE THE DRAGON IS AND PRAY I DON'T DIE
YOU HAVE A BETTER PLAN RIGHT?
ACTUALLY?
NO

THE JUDGE IS DEAD!
A DRAGON IS LOOSE UPON THE CITY!
A DRAGON?

AS BIG AS A MOUNTAIN!
STRAIGHT FROM HELL IT CAME!
IT WILL KILL US ALL!

STAND FIRM! YOU CRY LIKE CHILDREN!
YOU WILL ACT AS SOLDIERS OR FIND YOUR HEADS DECORATING MY FATHER'S PALACE
PRINCESS ZHENG MAI, WHAT CAN WE DO AGAINST A DRAGON?

YOU THREE! TO THE POWDER BATTERY!
THE REST OF YOU FOLLOW ME!

WE ARE NOT WITHOUT WEAPONS!
YOU FUSS WITH YOUR BOOKS AND HERBS WHEN WE SHOULD BE RUNNING!
WHAT MIGHT A FRAIL OLD CRONE DO AGAINST THAT BEAST?
YOU DRAW PICTURES WHILE EVERYONE RUNS FOR THE MOUNTAINS!
YOUR SYMBOLS AND CALCULATIONS MEAN NOTHING!
WE WILL BE CRUSHED LIKE BUGS BENEATH ITS FEET! THIS HOUSE WILL BE OUR TOMB!
SHUT UP! SHUT UP!
CAN YOU NOT SEE I AM IN QUIET CONTEMPLATION!

THIS WAY!
THIS WAY!
WE NEAR THE DRAGON!
I KNOW! I CAN HEAR THE THUNDER!
THAT IS ITS BREATH CAN YOJ FEEL THE WIND OF IT?
THAT IS THE SCENT OF HELL
YES MY FATHER

AN *EMPEROR* DRAGON I HAVE NEVER ACTUALLY *SEEN* THIS TYPE

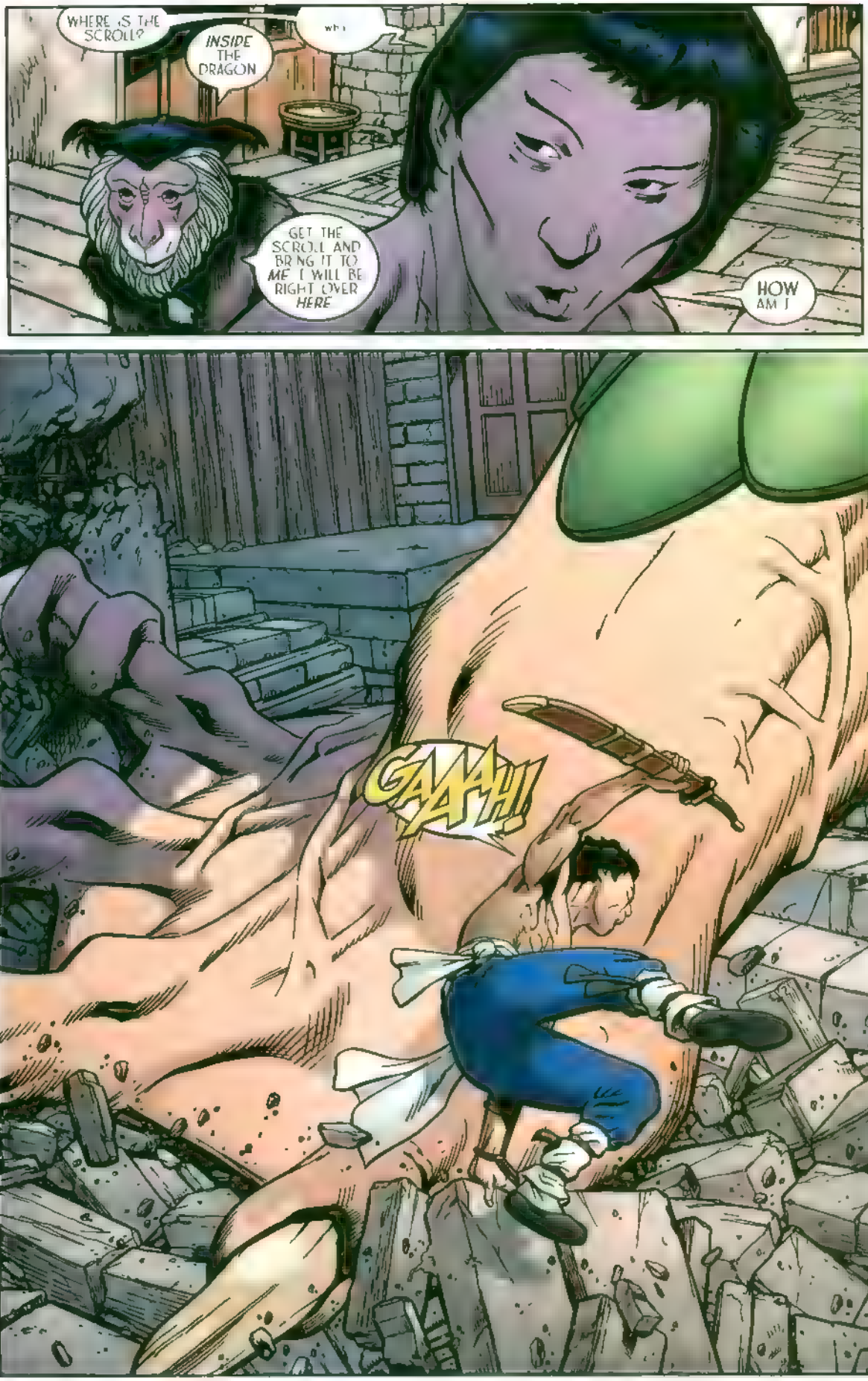
HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO K... *THAT?*

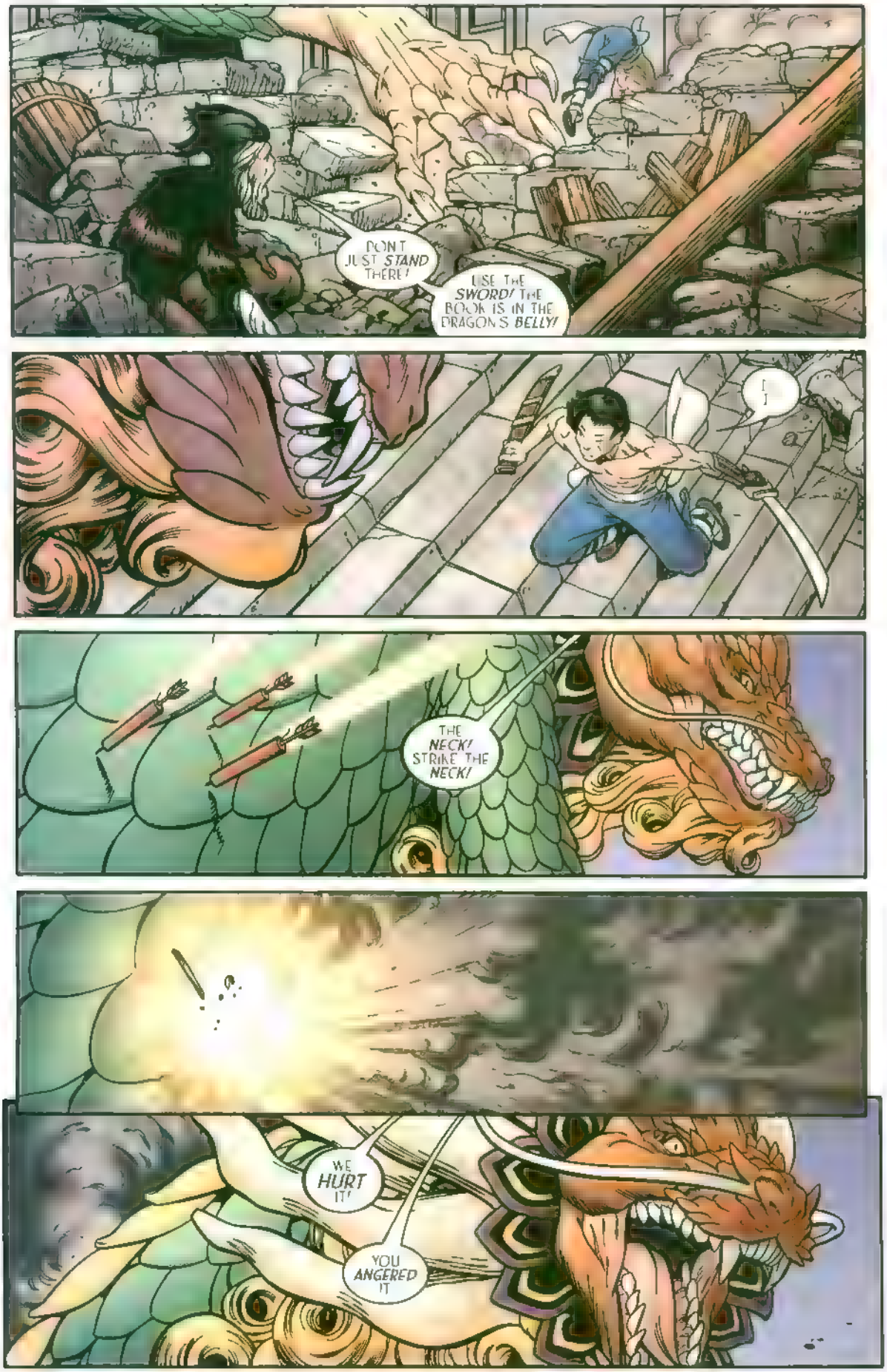
YOU *CANNOT*

Uh?

YOU MUST GET THE *SCROLL* BACK THE BOOK OF THE

I *KNOW* THE NAME OF THE BOOK


WHERE IS THE SCROLL?
INSIDE THE DRAGON
WH-
GET THE SCROLL AND BRING IT TO ME I WILL BE RIGHT OVER HERE
HOW AM I
GAAAH!


DON'T JUST *STAND* THERE!
USE THE *SWORD!* THE BOOK IS IN THE DRAGON'S *BELLY!*
[ ]
THE *NECK!* STRIKE THE *NECK!*
WE *HURT* IT!
YOU *ANGERED* IT

AND IN ITS ANGER IT WILL DESTROY US!
IT FEELS PAIN IT IS REAL WE CAN TOUCH IT WE CAN HURT IT
THE THIEF WILL NEED ALL THE FRIENDS HE CAN GET

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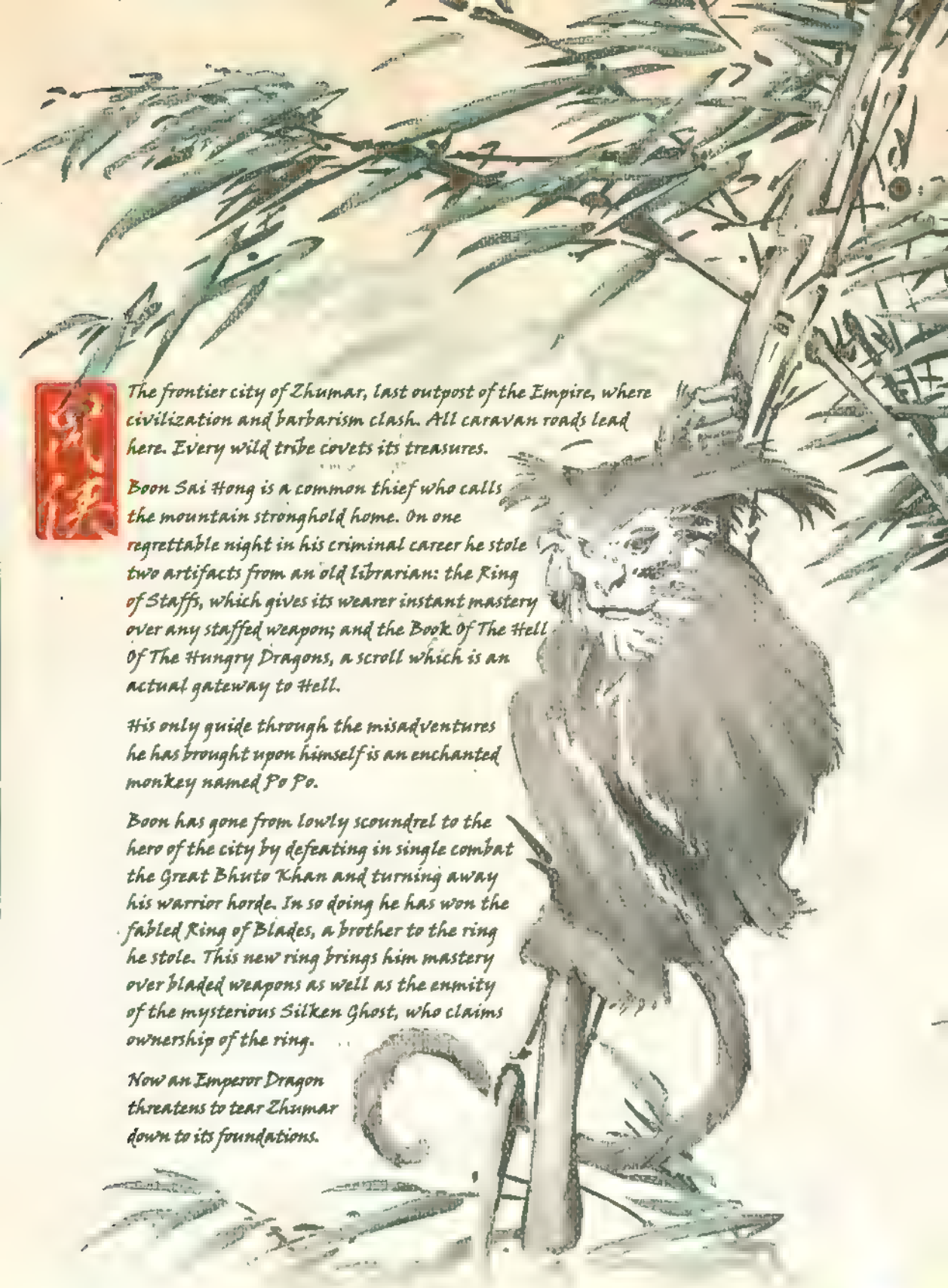

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Now an Emperor Dragon threatens to tear Zhumar down to its foundations.

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BOOM!
WHAT!
STRIKE AT THE BELLY! IT'S THE WEAKEST PLACE ON HIS ARMOUR!
"A hero is a man cursed by fate with unfortunate timing."

EXCELLENT ADVICE PO PO

UNFORTUNATELY--

BETWEEN MY BLADE AND HIS BELLY

IS A LOT OF DRAGON!

YOU HAVE BEEN GRANTED THE RING OF BLADES FOR A PURPOSE!

NOW IS YOUR CHANCE FOR GLORY!

GLORY

ALL I WANTED WAS A LIFE OF THIEVERY

NOW ALL I HAVE IS FATE AND A NOISY MONKEY

WE MUST *AID* THE THEF!

BUT OUR ARROWS HAVE *LITTLE* EFFECT PRINCESS ZHENG!

FIRE TO *DISTRACT* THE BEAST!

TNK

TEI SU! YOU ARE OF NO *SERVICE* HE

SEEK *SHELTER!*

IF YOU SO *ORDER,* PRINCESS

FASTER,
YOU LOUTS! I MIGHT HAVE HITCHED THE CART TO TURTLES AND FLOWN SWIFTER!
GRANDMOTHER! YOU ARE IN DANGER!
I KNOW, TIGER MAH! THERE'S A DRAGON AHEAD AND ONLY I KNOW HOW TO STOP IT!
HOW WILL
-PANT-
HERBS AND
-PANT-
SPIRIT WATER
-PANT-
STOP A
-PANT-
DRAGON?
THIS CITY WAS BUILT BY GEOMANCERS OF GREAT WISDOM
ZHUMAR HAS WAYS TO DEFEND ITSELF IF ONLY ONE AS O.D AS ME REMEMBERS THE ANCIENT WAYS

SHOULD MY MEMORY FAIL ME WE ARE DOOMED
OH!
HUNH!
PRINCESS!
WHO ?

UNNH!

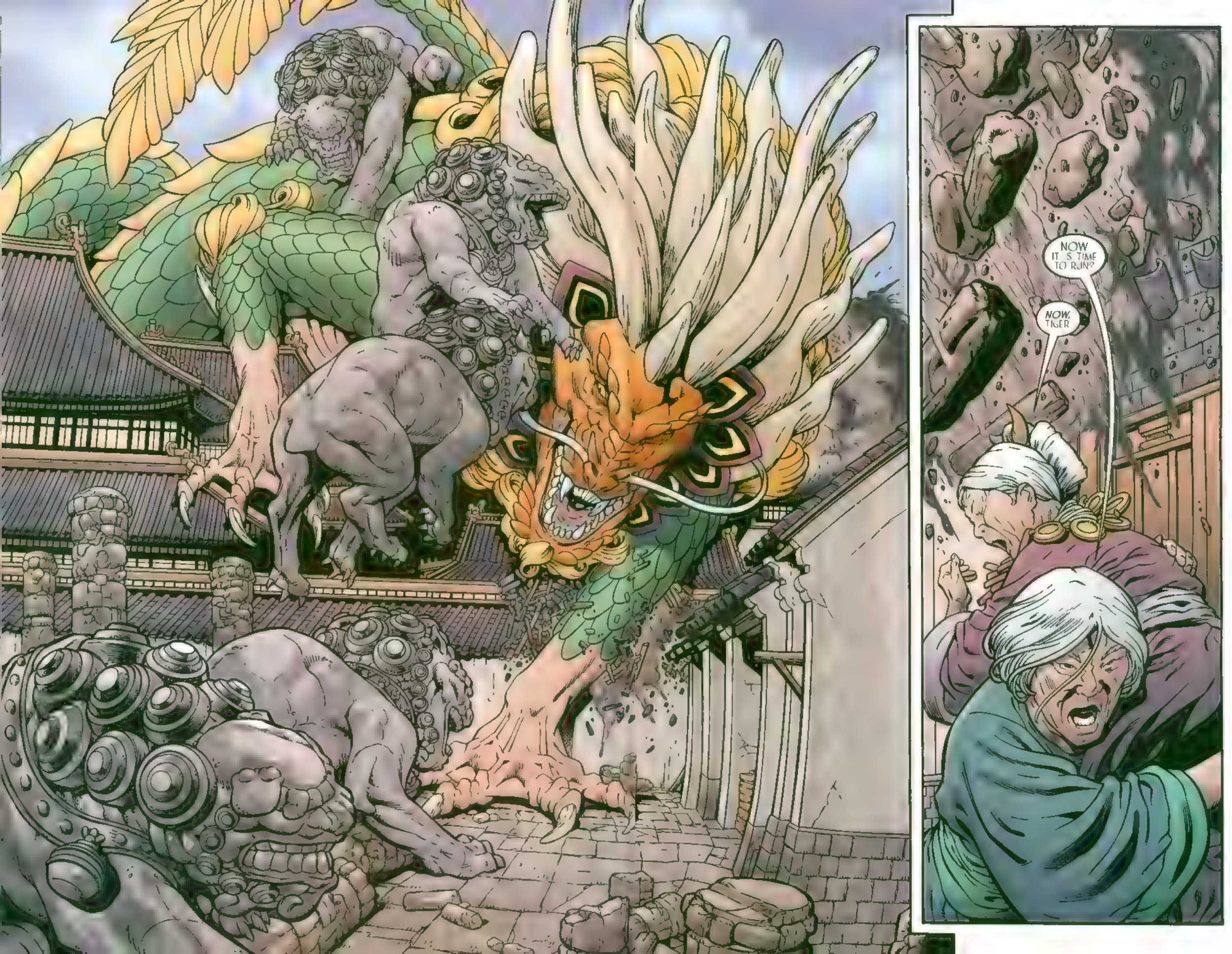
THE ROCKET ARROWS!

HUMANS

MORE OF A DANGER TO *THEMSELVES* THAN TO DRAGONS

唤醒
升起
你是
THE DRAGON
IT IS CLOSE
WHEN WILL YOU CEASE THIS FOOLISHNESS OLD MOTHER?
需要
AHHH!
GODS AND DEVILS!
的战斗
GRANDMOTHER! IT IS PAST TIME TO FLEE!
NO PRAYER WILL SAVE US NOW!
IGNORANT NEPHEW

THERE IS A WORLD *BEYOND* WHAT YOU CAN SEE AND SMELL!
AND IN THAT WORLD THE RIGHT PRAYER IS *EVERYTHING!*
THAT WORLD TURNS ON *SIMPLE* THINGS.
A *WORD*
A SPLASH OF *WATER*
GO, DOGS OF ZHUMAR!
DEFEND THE CITY OF YOUR MASTERS!
HONOR THEIR MEMORY!


NOW IT'S TIME TO RUN?
NOW, TIGER

I... I THOUGHT THEY WERE JUST STATUES
THEY ARE SACRED GUARDIANS PLACED IN ZHUMAR LONG BEFORE THE EMPIRE RULED
THEY WILL VANQUISH THE DRAGON!
Hmf!
I PRAY THAT THEY WILL

WHAT AM I TO DO?
SCROLL
I MUST BE MAD!
WE FACE WHAT COMES TOGETHER, BOON!
THEN WE ARE BOTH MAD!

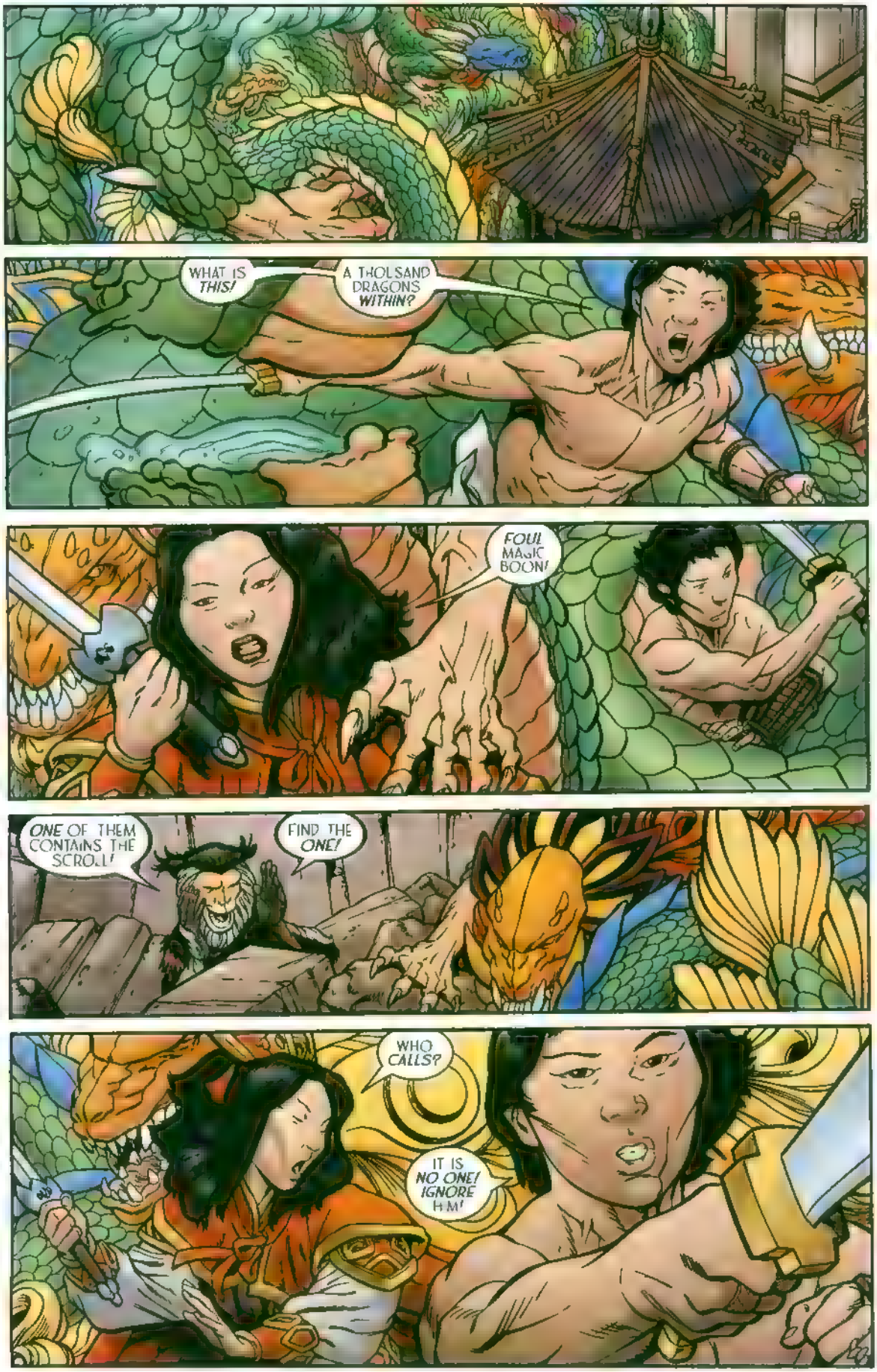
KA!!

HUH

HRSSS

HRARR

GODS OF OUR FATHERS


WHAT IS THIS!
A THOUSAND DRAGONS WITHIN?
FOUL MAGIC BOON!
ONE OF THEM CONTAINS THE SCROLL!
FIND THE ONE!
WHO CALLS?
IT IS NO ONE! IGNORE HIM!

IN WHICH DRAGON LIES THE SCROLL?
THAT ONE HAS BLUE EYES--
HA!
THE SCROLL!

OF WHAT USE IS THE SCROLL?
IT WILL SEND THEM BACK TO THEIR OWN CURSED WORLD!
PO PO, IT IS UP TO YOU!
THE INCANTATION TO RETURN THE DRAGONS TO THEIR HELL IS
--HERE!
Gods of thunder
Gods of cloud
To chaos bring order
To discord deliver harmony

IT'S WORKING!
KEEP READING, PO PO!
Heaven and Earth aligned
Fire and water in place
Heed my plea
NO!
Set the worlds aright
EEP!

POPO!

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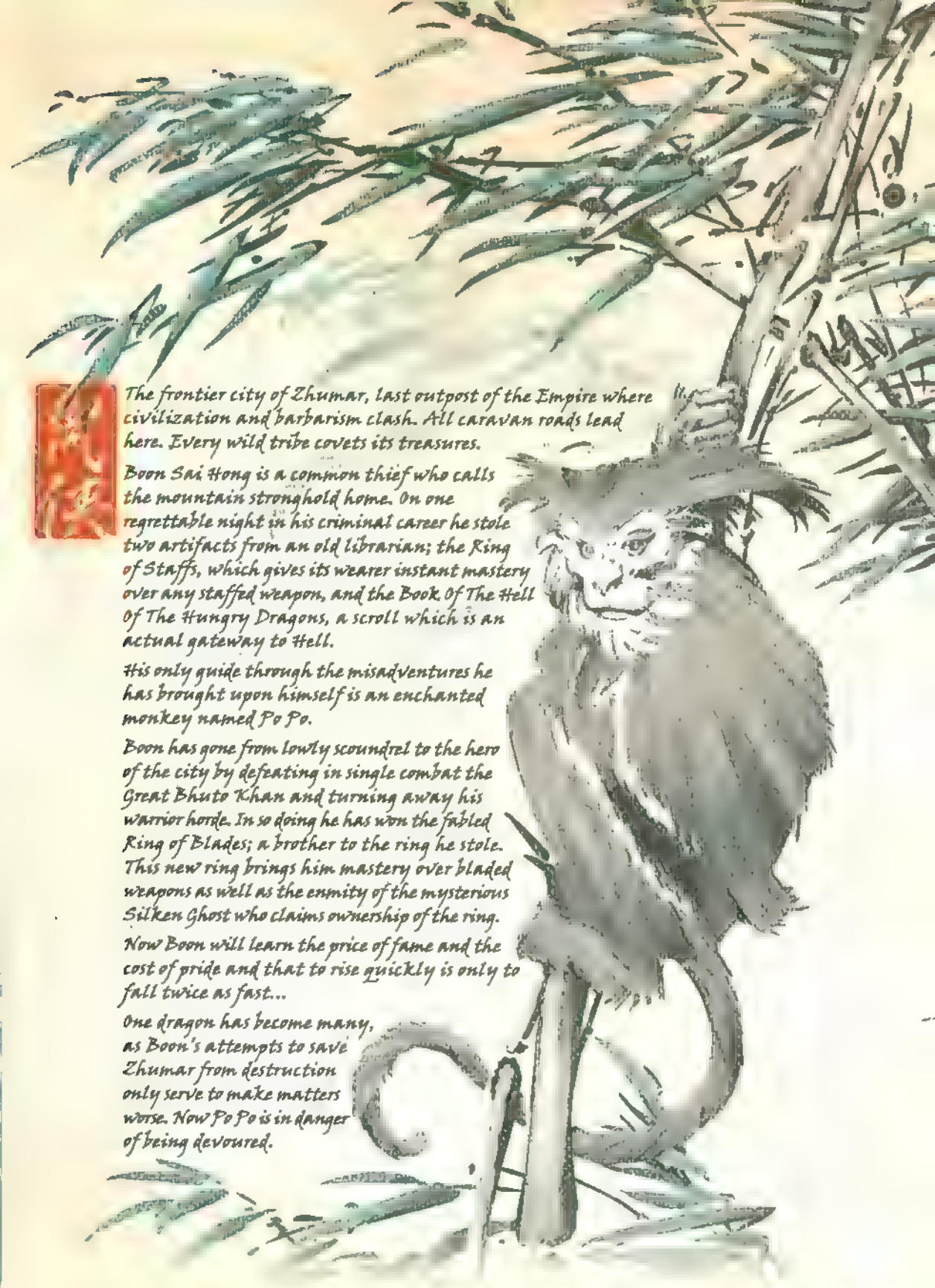

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Now Boon will learn the price of fame and the cost of pride and that to rise quickly is only to fall twice as fast...

One dragon has become many, as Boon's attempts to save Zhumar from destruction only serve to make matters worse. Now Po Po is in danger of being devoured.

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YOU?

THE SILKEN GHOST!

I THOUGHT

HAD YOU THOUGHT WE WOULD NOT BE WHERE WE ARE NOW, BOON SAI HONG

"Victory without courage is chance
Victory without risk is hollow.
Victory without loss is impossible."

Wing Tei Sun

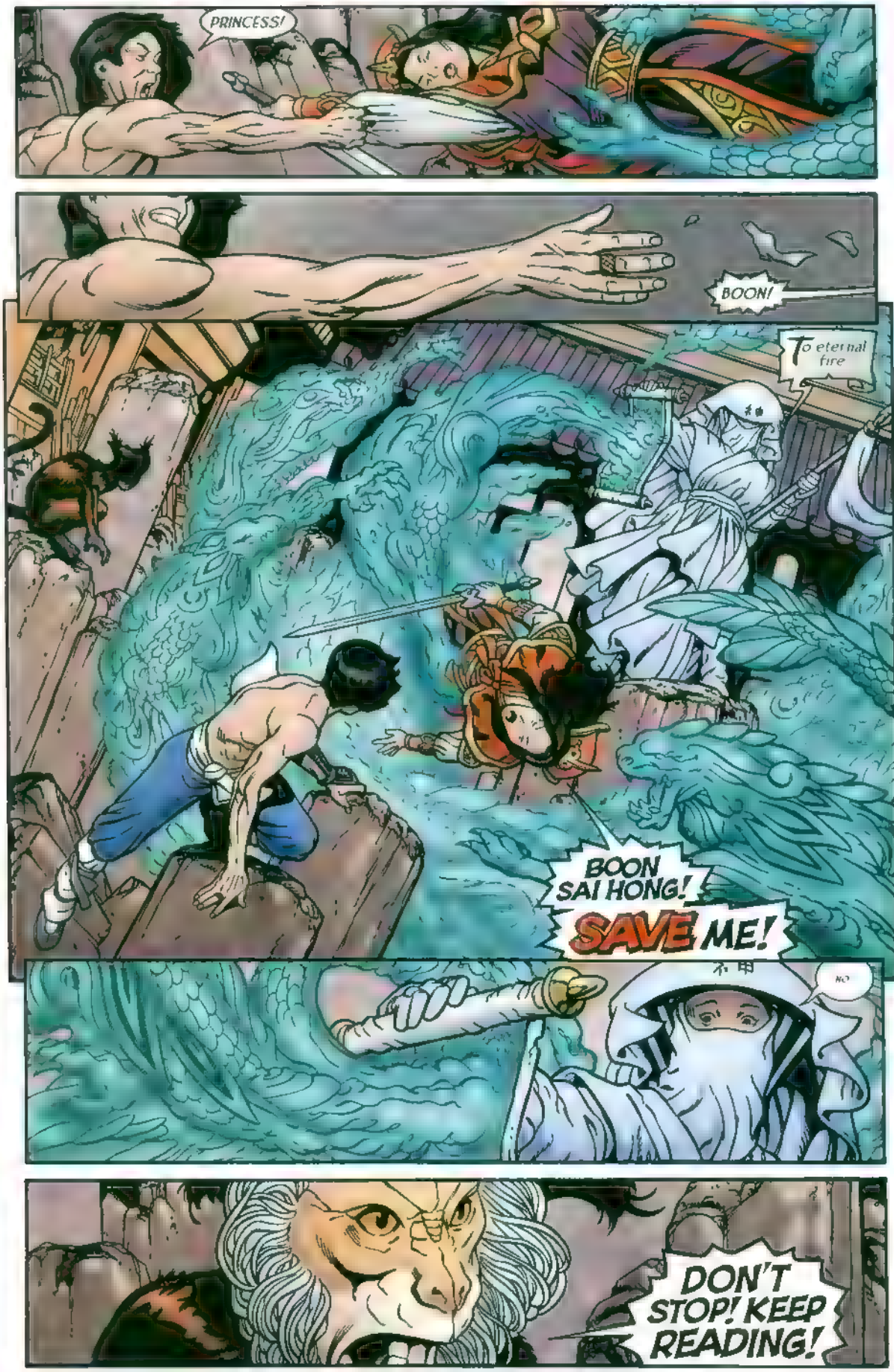
THE SCROLL UNNH!
THE INCANTATION
YOU GAMBLED AWAY THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS TO JUDGE XIAN
WHAT DID YOU THINK ONE SO EVIL WOULD DO WITH AN OBJECT OF SUCH POWER?
YOUR IGNORANCE MAY DESTROY US ALL, BOON SA HONG

BOON!
YOU MUST GET THE BOOK FROM HER!
CURSE YOU
-UNN-
I AM TRYING!
WHO DO YOU SPEAK TO? I SEE NO ONE!
AN IRRITANT, PRINCESS A PRATTLING, YAMMERING PEST!
THE ARMY HAS FLED. THE TEMPLE DOGS FALL.
HOW MIGHT JUST THREE BLADES SAVE A CITY?
THE SCROLL - ONLY THE SCROLL

IT RELEASED THE DRAGONS NOW IT MUST IMPRISON THEM ONCE MORE
BUT WHO WILL READ THE ANCIENT TEXT?
WHO, INDEED?
AN ILLITERATE THIEF? OR PERHAPS MYSELF?
Gods of thunder, Gods of cloud
To chaos bring order To discord deliver harmony
Uh?
Heaven and Earth aligned, Fire and water in place
Heed my plea Set the worlds aright

The storm must pass
The oceans calm
Rage subsides
Hell returns home
Lord of Dragons
Lord of Death
Open the gateway
Swing wide the door
Call Chaos
home

THEY VANISH ONCE MORE!
To the pits
To the darkness
THE HORROR ENDS!
The abyss awaits.
Fire and shadow
UH?
Return
RETURN
To the Hell of your creation
PRINCESS!
NO!
HUNH!
To eternal fire


PRINCESS!
BOON!
To eternal fire
BOON SAI HONG!
SAVE ME!
NO
DON'T STOP! KEEP READING!

YOU MUST COMPLETE THE PRAYER!
THE DRAGONS WILL RETURN WITH NEW STRENGTH
YOU CAN'T!
Return Return
The blazing path calls.
The call that cannot be denied
NOOOOO
Heed my plea
Set the worlds aright
YOU SPEAK?
SHUT UP

YOU DAMNED HER!
THE PRINCESS IS LOST FOREVER IN A WORLD OF DRAGONS!
I WOULD GLADLY SACRIFICE MYSELF WERE IT ME
神
IN ANY CASE THE FAULT LIES WITH YOU
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?
YOUR MISUSE OF THE ARTIFACTS YOU STOLE HAS BROUGHT THIS CALAMITY UPON US
SURRENDER THE RING OF BLADES
I CANNOT
YOU WILL

I THOUGHT YOU WERE THE PRINCESS WHY SHOULD I TRUST YOU?
BECAUSE YOU CANNOT TRUST YOURSELF
YOU WILL NOT HAVE THE RING
YOU ARE NOT FATED TO WEAR IT
AIIE!
I ASKED YOU BEFORE
NOW I DEMAND IT!

I CANNOT GET IT OFF MY FINGER!
THE RINGS ARE A PART OF ME
SEE? TRY AS I MIGHT I CANNOT
REMOVE IT
Huh?

YOU SEE?
I DEFEATED YOU. I AM FATED TO WEAR THE RING OF BLADES.
THE RING CHOOSES THE WEARER.
I SHALL LEAVE YOU THE RING OF STAFFS.
AS WELL AS THE BOOK AND THE PHOENIX HEART.
I TRUST YOU HAVE LEARNED TO GUARD THEM WELL.
WE EACH HAVE OUR DESTINIES.

I THOUGHT PRINCESS ZHENG AND THE SILKEN GHOST WERE *ONE* IN THE SAME

IF THEY WERE THE SAME WE'D NOW BE RID OF THEM *BOTH*

THAT *SOUND*

I HEAR IT AS *WELL*

LIKE THE *ROAR* OF THE WIND

OR THE *BOOM* OF THUNDER

OR THE CRIES OF AN ARMY OF *IDIOTS.*

POON! POON! POON! POON! POON! POON!

RUN, PO PO!

THIS IS HOW IT ALL *BEGAN!*

POON! POON! POON!

IT IS NOT *OVER* NOT *YET*
NOT *OVER?* THE DRAGONS ARE *GONE,* RIGHT?
YES, HU JIAO THE DRAGONS HAVE *FLED*
BUT THIS IS THE *START* OF WHAT I FEEL WILL BE *TURBULENT* TIMES.
PLEASE DON'T SAY THAT
BOSS TIGER! YOU MUST *HELP* ME!
Eh?

A *MOB* HUNTS ME! THEY WISH TO CELEBRATE ME AS A *HERO* AGAIN!

I CAN'T *TAKE* IT!

YOU BRING *FRESH* TROUBLE TO MY DOOR BOON?

THE JUDGE'S GUARDS, THAT SILK WITCH AND THIS *FILTHY*

OW!

YOU *WHINE* LIKE A CHILD, TIGER MAH!

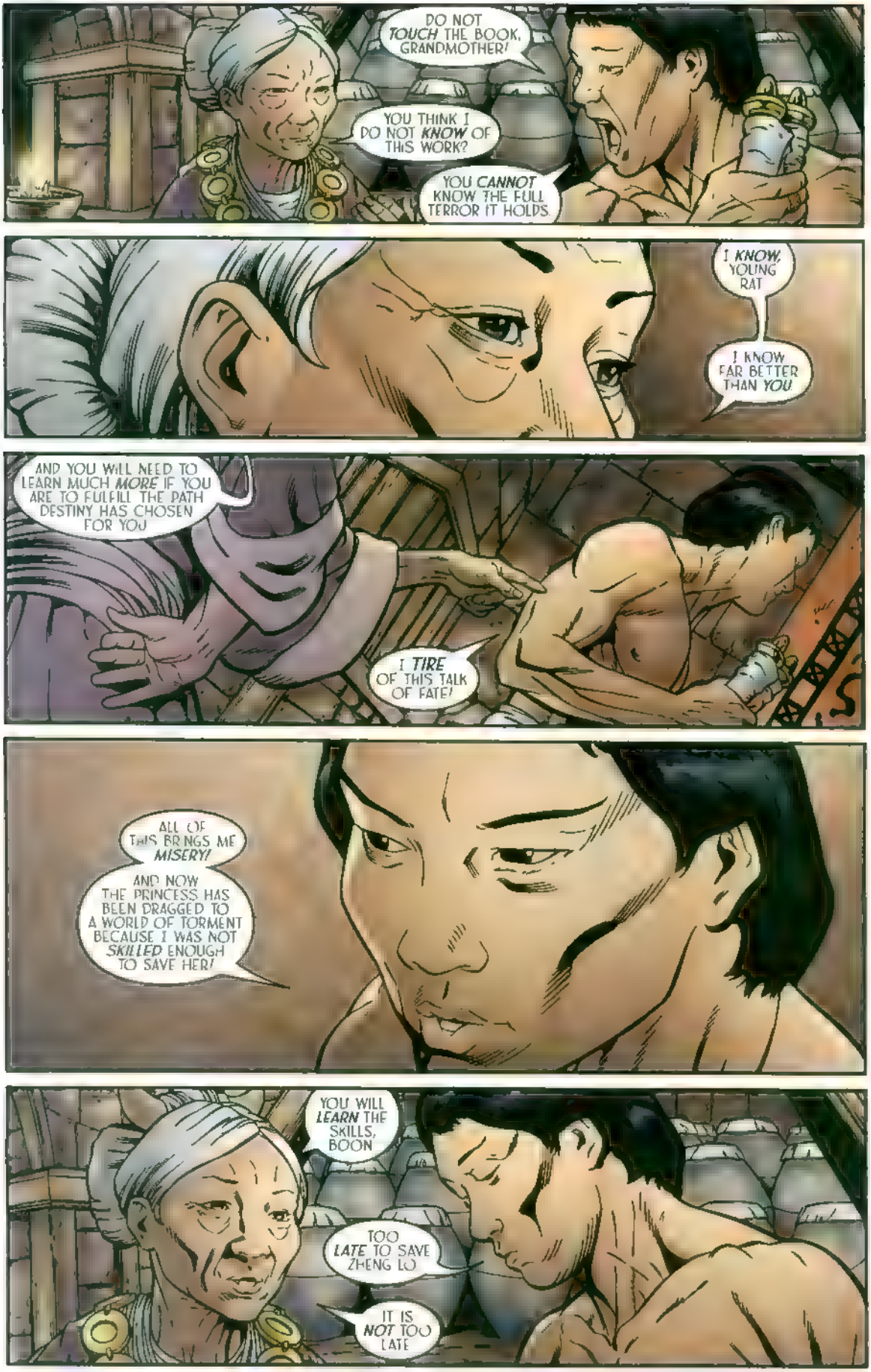
BOON DOES NOT BRING *TROUBLE*

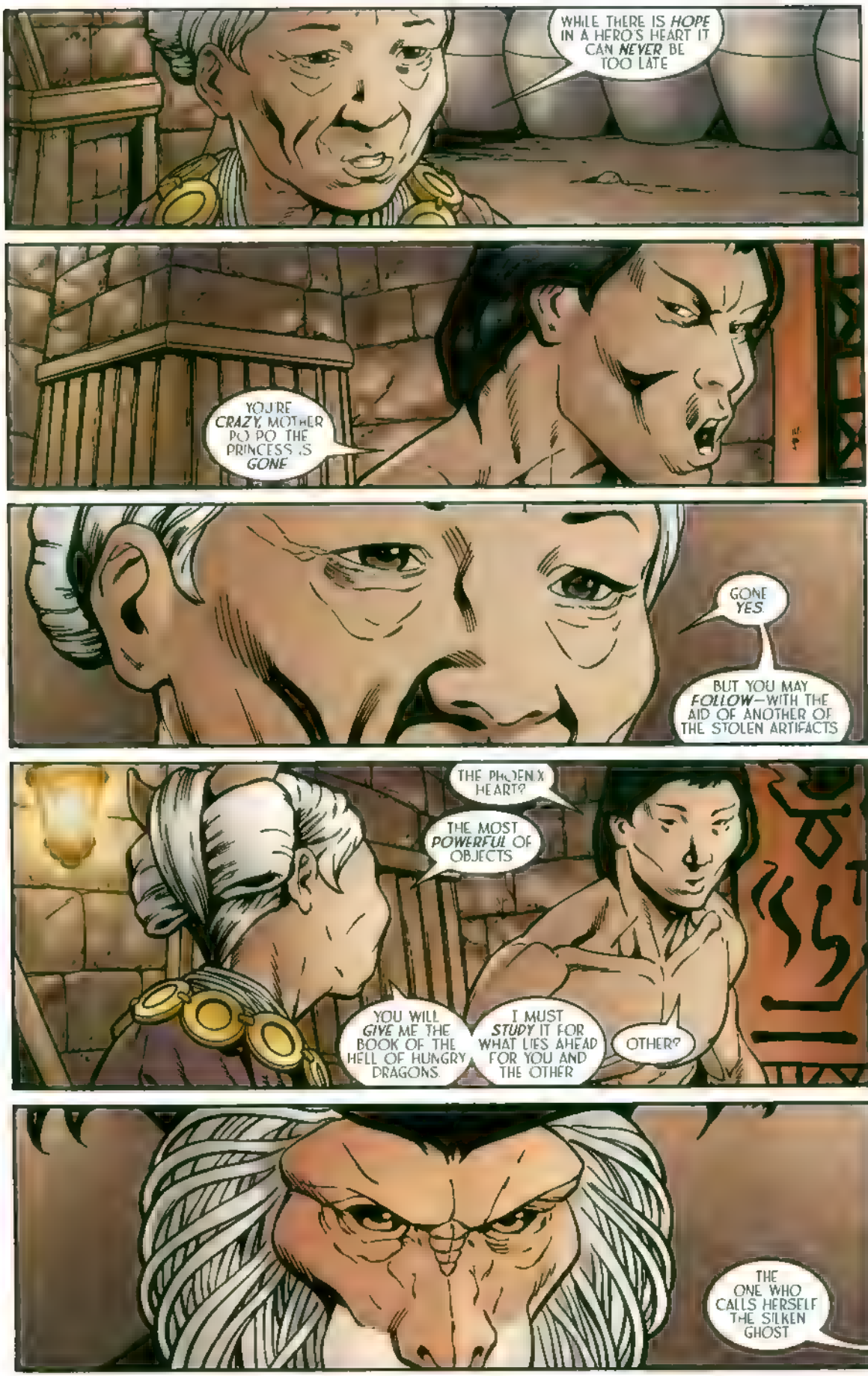
BOON IS AT THE *CENTER* OF THESE EVENTS TRUE

BUT *WITHOUT* HIM, WE WOULD BE LOST FATE HAS *CHOSEN* HIM

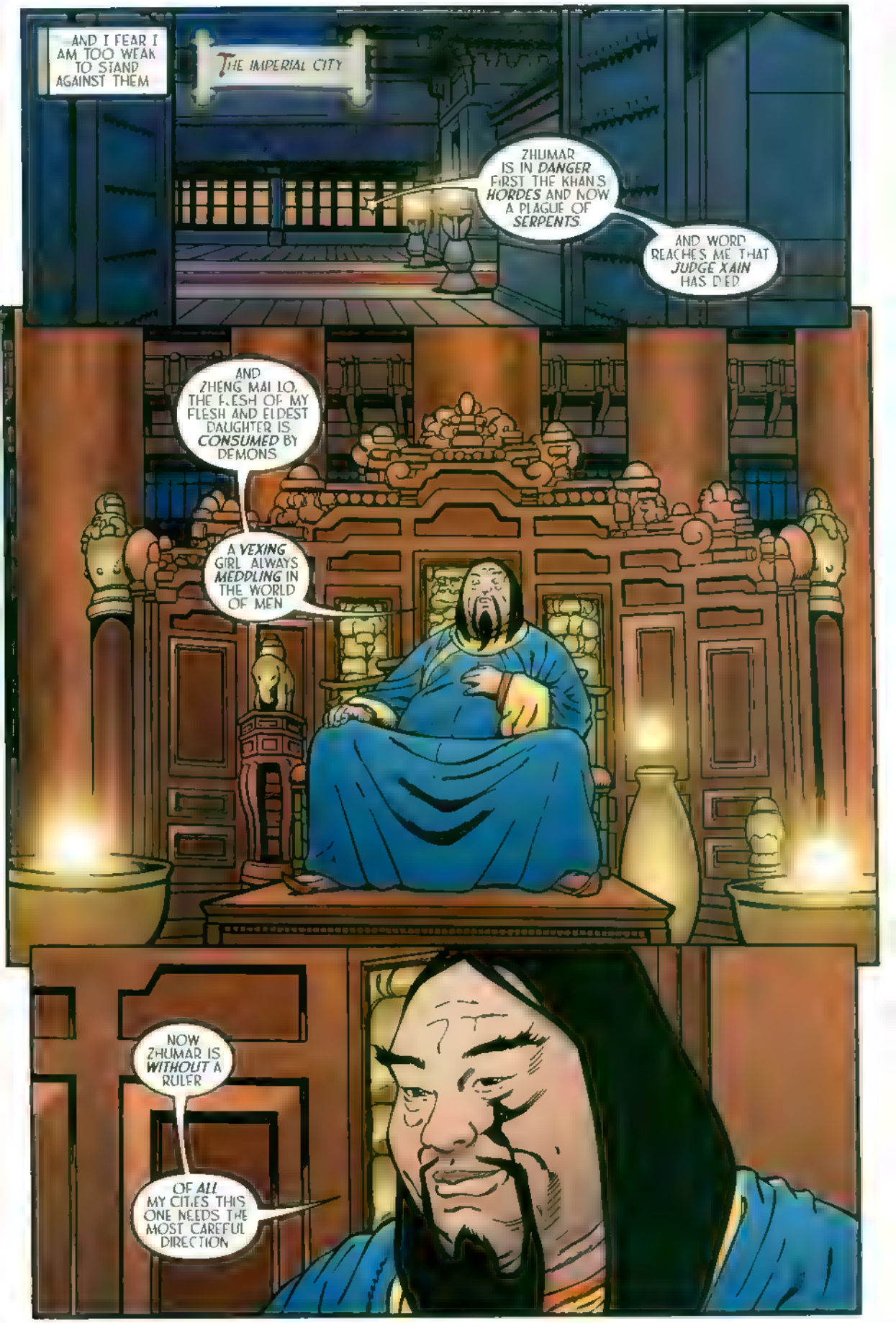
AND GIVEN HIM A *SPIRIT* TO WATCH OVER HIM, eh?

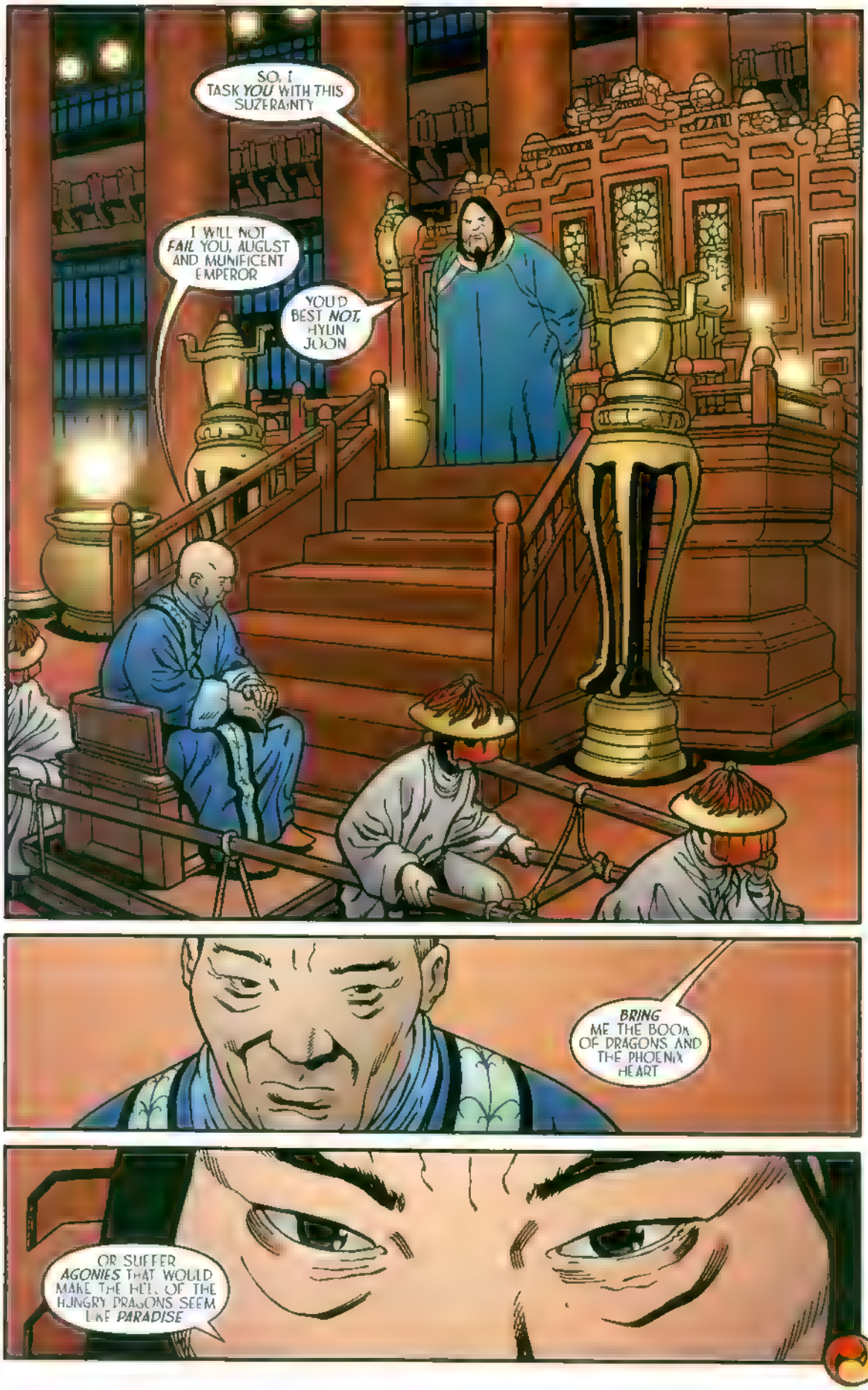
Hrmm?


DO NOT TOUCH THE BOOK, GRANDMOTHER!
YOU THINK I DO NOT KNOW OF THIS WORK?
YOU CANNOT KNOW THE FULL TERROR IT HOLDS
I KNOW, YOUNG RAT
I KNOW FAR BETTER THAN YOU
AND YOU WILL NEED TO LEARN MUCH MORE IF YOU ARE TO FULFILL THE PATH DESTINY HAS CHOSEN FOR YOU
I TIRE OF THIS TALK OF FATE!
ALL OF THIS BRINGS ME MISERY!
AND NOW THE PRINCESS HAS BEEN DRAGGED TO A WORLD OF TORMENT BECAUSE I WAS NOT SKILLED ENOUGH TO SAVE HER!
YOU WILL LEARN THE SKILLS, BOON
TOO LATE TO SAVE ZHENG LO
IT IS NOT TOO LATE


WHILE THERE IS *HOPE* IN A HERO'S HEART IT CAN *NEVER* BE TOO LATE
YOU'RE *CRAZY*, MOTHER PO PO. THE PRINCESS IS *GONE*
GONE *YES*
BUT YOU MAY *FOLLOW*—WITH THE AID OF ANOTHER OF THE STOLEN ARTIFACTS
THE PHOENIX HEART?
THE MOST *POWERFUL* OF OBJECTS
YOU WILL *GIVE* ME THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF HUNGRY DRAGONS
I MUST *STUDY* IT FOR WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR YOU AND THE OTHER
OTHER?
THE ONE WHO CALLS HERSELF THE SILKEN GHOST

HER FATE IS ENTWINED WITH YOURS
BELOVED FATHER, THE DAYS GROW DARK
THESE ARE DAYS YOU WARNED OF, DAYS YOU SAW FORESPOKEN IN THE MOST SECRET OF BOOKS
BUT YOU ARE NO LONGER HERE TO FACE THEM WITH ME
AND I AM NOT CERTAIN I CAN FACE WHAT THOSE DAYS BRING
BELOVED FATHER, GRANT ME YOUR STRENGTH
神申
FOR FORCES GATHER LIKE MOUNTAIN STORMS


AND I FEAR I AM TOO WEAK TO STAND AGAINST THEM
THE IMPERIAL CITY
ZHUMAR IS IN *DANGER* FIRST THE KHAN'S *HORDES* AND NOW A PLAGUE OF *SERPENTS*
AND WORD REACHES ME THAT *JUDGE XAIN* HAS DIED
AND ZHENG MAI LO, THE FLESH OF MY FLESH AND ELDEST DAUGHTER IS *CONSUMED* BY DEMONS
A *VEXING* GIRL ALWAYS *MEDDLING* IN THE WORLD OF MEN
NOW ZHUMAR IS *WITHOUT* A RULER
OF *ALL* MY CITIES THIS ONE NEEDS THE MOST CAREFUL DIRECTION


SO, I TASK *YOU* WITH THIS SUZERAINTY
I WILL NOT *FAIL* YOU, AUGUST AND MUNIFICENT EMPEROR
YOU'D BEST *NOT*, HYUN JOON
BRING ME THE BOOK OF DRAGONS AND THE PHOENIX HEART
OR SUFFER *AGONIES* THAT WOULD MAKE THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS SEEM LIKE *PARADISE*

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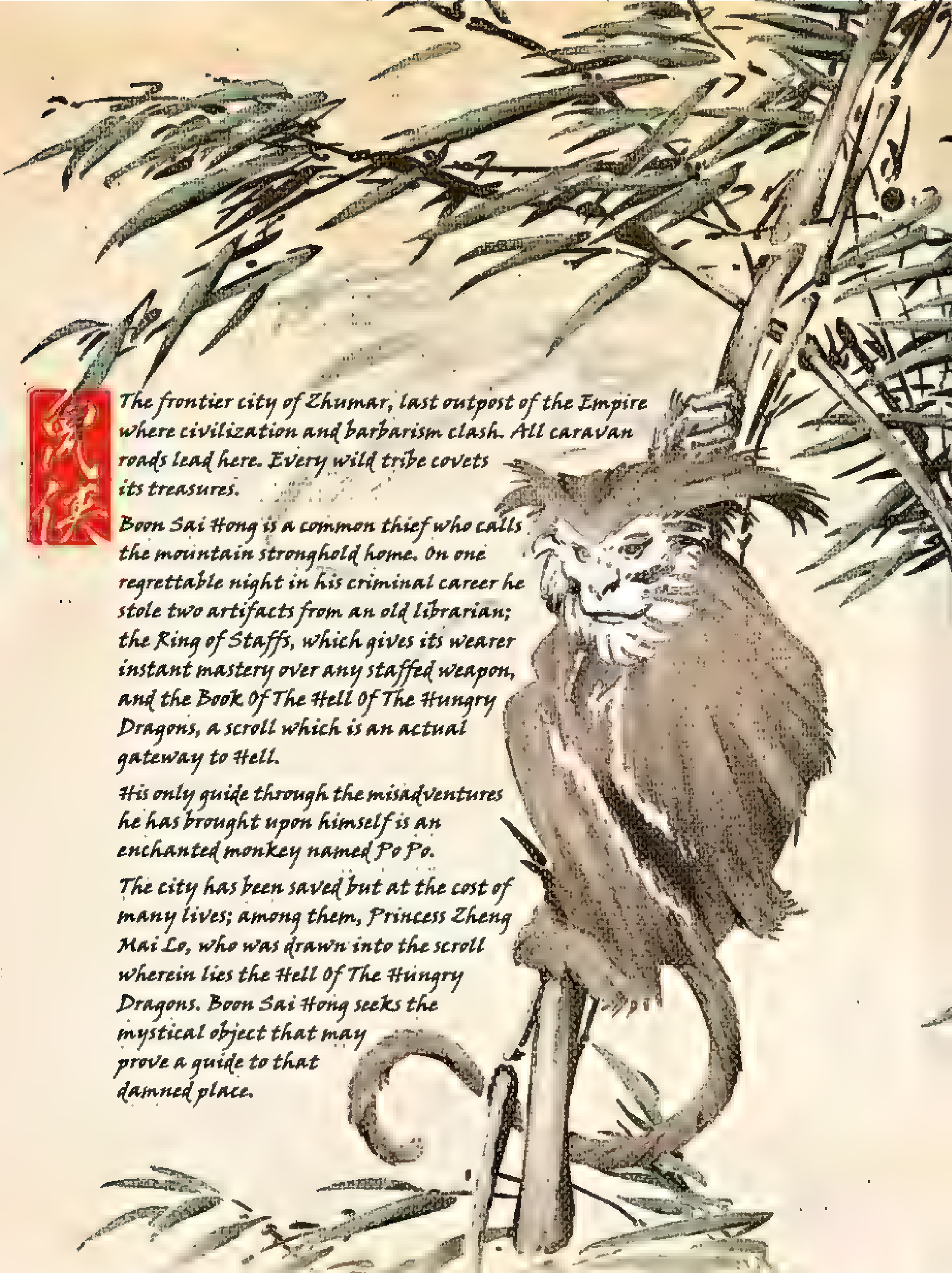

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The city has been saved but at the cost of many lives; among them, Princess Zheng Mai Lo, who was drawn into the scroll wherein lies the Hell Of The Hungry Dragons. Boon Sai Hong seeks the mystical object that may prove a guide to that damned place.

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WHO *DELAYS* AN IMPERIAL MINISTER? *EXPLAIN* WHY WE HAVE STOPPED OUR PROGRESS!

THE ROAD TO ZHUMAR IS *BLOCKED*, MINISTER HYUN

"Do not forget the dead. Trust me in this, young scholar. They have not forgotten you."

Wing Tei Sun

DEMONS AND FLAME!

WHAT *IS* THIS SAD PARADE THAT APPROACHES? AM I TO REIGN OVER A CITY *WITHOUT* CITIZENS?

I DO NOT *KNOW*, GRACIOUS MINISTER

THEN FIND *OUT!*

GRAB *THAT* ONE THERE

UH? WHAT HAVE I *DONE*?

WHY DO YOU *DEPART* ZHUMAR?

THE PLACE IS *CURSED*, MY LORD!

THE KHAN'S *HORDES!* THEN *DRAGONS!* IT IS NOT A FIT PLACE TO *LIVE!*

SO, THIS IS THE MESS *LEFT* ME BY THE ODIOUS JUDGE XAIN

PERHAPS THE RULE OF THIS FORTRESS WAS NOT THE GIFT I *THOUGHT* IT WAS

"PERHAPS SOMEWHERE IN THE IMPERIAL CITY THE EMPEROR LAUGHS AT HIS LITTLE JEST"

YOU BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A HOPE OF *RESTORING* PRINCESS ZHENG MAI TO US?

QUIET, BOON!

I ONLY ASK BECAUSE I SAW HER DRAWN INTO *HELL* WITH MY OWN EYES

THE DOORWAY TO HELL OPENS *BOTH* WAYS

I'M *TOO* AWARE OF THAT, OLD MOTHER

THOUGH THE DRAGONS DRAGGED AWAY HER *PHYSICAL* FORM

IDIOT!

UH?

THERE MAY BE REMNANTS OF THE PRINCESS' *SPIRIT* STILL HERE

I THINK WE SHOULD SEARCH *HERE*

IF THAT IS SO THEN THE PHOENIX HEART WILL *REVEAL* HER SPIRIT FORM

IT IS HERE IN THE RUINS OF THE JUDGE'S HOUSE

Ah.

BUT WOULDN'T HER SPIRIT AND BODY HAVE GONE AS *ONE*?

IT IS BEST NOT TO *QUESTION* HER WAYS, BOON

AS MUCH AS I *WISH* THE PRINCESS RESTORED, I DISTRUST MAGIC

SOMETIMES IT PERFORMS *GOOD* WORKS

NOT IN MY EXPERIENCE TIGER MAH

消瘦的人要命的

IT APPEARS TO BE *WORKING*

WORKING TO WHAT *END*?

I HAVE THAT *UNEASY* FEELING IN MY STOMACH

升命的启示 愉快的

NOTHING

HER SPIRIT IS *NOT* PRESENT

YOU DID ALL YOU *COULD*

YOUR BRAVE FRIEND IS *DAMNED*.

I AM TO BLAME FOR THAT, OLD MOTHER

I AM *RELIEVED* THAT YOUR MAGIC DIDN'T WORK

I WOULD RATHER LIVE MY LIFE *WITHOUT* ENCHANTMENTS

Ah ah ah

BAD MOVE?

I ONLY *SUGGEST* FURTHER THOUGHT

YOU SEEK TO *INTIMIDATE* ME

I WOULD NEED TO *STOOP* TO INTIMIDATE YOU

I *DISLIKE* PLAYING WITH--

HAIL THE GATE!

UH?

THE GATE LIES *OPEN*, IDIOT! NO NEED TO *HAIL* US!

WELCOME TO WHAT IS *LEFT* OF ZHUMAR

DO YOU *KNOW* TO WHOM YOU SPEAK?

SOMEONE WHO IS TOO *DIM* TO KNOW WHEN A GATE IS OPEN OR SHUT

I *SEE* THE GATE IS OPEN! THAT IS PRECISELY THE PROBLEM!

I WISH IT CLOSED!

I WISH **ALL** OF THE GATES CLOSED!

UPON *WHO'S* AUTHORITY?

THE IMPERIAL THRONE!

I AM THE NEW *LORD* OF ZHUMAR!

I HOLD THE LIFE AND DEATH OF EVERYONE WITHIN THESE WALLS IN MY HAND!

AND I AM FINDING THE BURDEN OF YOU THREE VERY TIRESOME INDEED!

NOW, ASSEMBLE THE GUARD AND ***PRAY*** THEY ARRIVE SMARTLY!

CALL AN A.ARM!

NOW!

A CITY ***POPULATED*** BY DULLARDS

"WHAT INDISCRETION BROUGHT ME TO *THIS* LOW PLACE?"

IF ONLY I HAD *NOT* STOLEN THE SCROLL

IF ONLY I'D *GIVEN* THE PRINCESS THE SCROLL

IF ONLY I HAD NOT THOUGHT MYSELF SO *CLEVER* LOSING THE SCROLL TO THE JUDGE

REGRET IS TIME SPENT IN *FOLLY*

HAVE *YOU* NO REGRETS, PO PO?

I HAVE ONLY TO GLANCE AT *YOU* TO REMEMBER A BOATLOAD OF REGRETS

I REGRET ALSO THAT MY *BOWL* IS NEARLY EMPTY

IN ALL MY LIFE AS A THIEF THAT SCROLL IS THE ONLY THEFT FOR WHICH I FEEL *GUILT*

NOT FOR THE THEFT, BUT FOR *DOOMING* THE PRINCESS

NOW SHE IS *GONE*, AND I AM TO *BLAME!* AND I CAN DO *NOTHING* TO BRING HER BACK!

ARE YOU GOING TO EAT *YOUR* RICE?

BOON SAI HONG

EH?

HAVE YOU NO TEARS FOR MY PASSING?

JUDGE X'AIN!

YOU ARE JUST AS MUCH TO BLAME FOR MY DEATH, YOUNG MISCREANT

YOU **TRICKED** ME INTO TAKING THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS

HOW WAS I TO KNOW THAT THOSE DRAGONS WOULD END MY LIFE?

YOU SEE YOU WERE TRYING TO TRICK ME FIRST!

I SHOULD BE **THUS** BECAUSE OF A SIMPLE TURN OF THE TILES?

AM I **MAD?**

CAN YOU SEE HIM TOO, PO PO?

P-P-PO?

DO YOU SEE IT AS **WELL**, OLD MOTHER?

INDEED I **DO**, BOON!

AND I WILL NOT *TOLERATE* T IN MY HOUSE!

OFF MY TABLE, YOU VILE *BEAST!*

EEK!

THAT GEM! THAT BLAZING GEM!

THE PHOENIX HEART?

IT SUMMONED ME FROM SLEEP!

BUT I AM A PHANTOM!

NOW YOU WILL USE IT TO RESTORE ME TO FLESH!

I CANNOT!

DO NOT DEFY ME, BOON!

YOU WILL CONTROL THAT MONKEY OR I WILL MAKE A SOUP OF HIM!

SHE'S?

I AM TIRED! THAT IS IT!

SOME SLEEP IS ALL I NEED!

I AM NO ILLUSION, BOON

BUH?

I LED A LIFE OF SELF INTEREST AND PRIDE

IT IS NOT AN AFTERLIFE I LOOK FORWARD TO

I AM NO GEOMANCER THE OLD WOMAN CAN HELP YOU

SHE IS A GREAT MYSTIC I CANNOT EVEN READ!

NOW GO BOTHER HER!

IT IS YOUR FAULT YOU DIED!

I CAN DO NOTHING FOR YOU!

THE OLD WOMAN CANNOT SEE ME ONLY YOU CAN

I CANNOT SEE YOU EITHER--I SEE NO GHOSTS ANYWHERE I LOOK

DAMNATION! WHY IS MY FATE TIED TO THAT OF A MORON?

I SEE NOTHING I HEAR NOTHING

I SEE NO PHANTOMS OR DEMONS OR DRAGONS

YOU WILL SEE ME! YOU WILL HEAR ME!

I JUDGE YOU IN DEATH AS I JUDGED YOU IN LIFE!

YOU **WILL** OBEY ME OR I SHALL MAKE YOUR LIFE MISERY UNTIL AND **AFTER** YOU DIE!

LEAVE ME BE!

LEAVE ME BE!

POOR GHOST

NOT EVEN THE RELEASE OF *DEATH* SPARES HIM BOON'S COMPANY

PLEASE DO NOT TAKE THIS AS DISRESPECT MINISTER HYUN JOON

-BUT WHAT YOJ PROPOSE IS *IMPRACTICAL*

I ONLY ASK THAT YOU COMPEL THE INHABITANTS OF ZHUMAR TO ***REMAIN*** IN ZHUMAR, CAPTAIN

I MAY NOT ***RUN*** A CITY THAT IS EMPTY OF PEOPLE

BY *FORCE?*

WHATEVER IS *NECESSARY*

MOST OF MY MEN HAVE ***ALREADY*** RUN AWAY

HOW MIGHT I CONTAIN A CITY OF *THOUSANDS* WITH THE FEW I HAVE LEFT?

BY MAKING THEM FEAR LEAVING ***MORE*** THAN THEY FEAR STAYING.

BYUN, KINDLY *SHOW* THE CAPTAIN THE CARGO WE BROUGHT FROM THE IMPERIAL CITY

YOU'LL FIND THAT *THESE* INSPIRE ALL THE FEAR YOU WILL NEED

SERENITY SERENITY

YOUR MIND AND BODY ARE BALANCED

MY BODY IS *DAMP*

HUSH!

IF I AM TO *SEPARATE* YOU FROM THIS SPIRIT THAT PLAGUES YOU, I MUST HAVE YOUR *FULL* CONCENTRATION!

THAT POTION SMELLS *EVIL!*

WILL THE *STINK* DRIVE THIS GHOST AWAY?

羊馬龍

BOON IS *HAUNTED*

Ah.

HA! THIS IS MEANT TO *EXORCISE* ME?

EVEN THE *GHOST* LAUGHS AT YOU!

I SAID, *HUSH!*

THE POTION IS ONLY *PART* OF THE INCANTATION

CAN YOU NOT JUST *VANISH?*

AND MISS THIS ENTERTAINMENT?

消疲的人
要命的

拼要
命的
的人
词的
反

WHAT? WHAT IS THIS?

GOD OF MY FATHERS

IT WORKS!

拼命的
反义词

反义词

拼要
命的
的人
词的
反

YOU HAVE NOT WON!

I AWAIT YOU IN ETERNITY, BOON!

I KNOW THAT I

IS THE PHANTOM *GONE*?

COMPLETELY HE SAID HE WILL *WAIT* FOR ME IN HELL

THERE ARE *MANY* HELLS, BOON

WHO IS TO KNOW TO WHICH *ONE* YOU ARE DESTINED?

IF I *AM* TO BE DAMNED AT ALL

THERE IS *HOPE*, YOUNG THIEF

IS THIS A *PART* OF THE SPELL, OLD MOTHER?

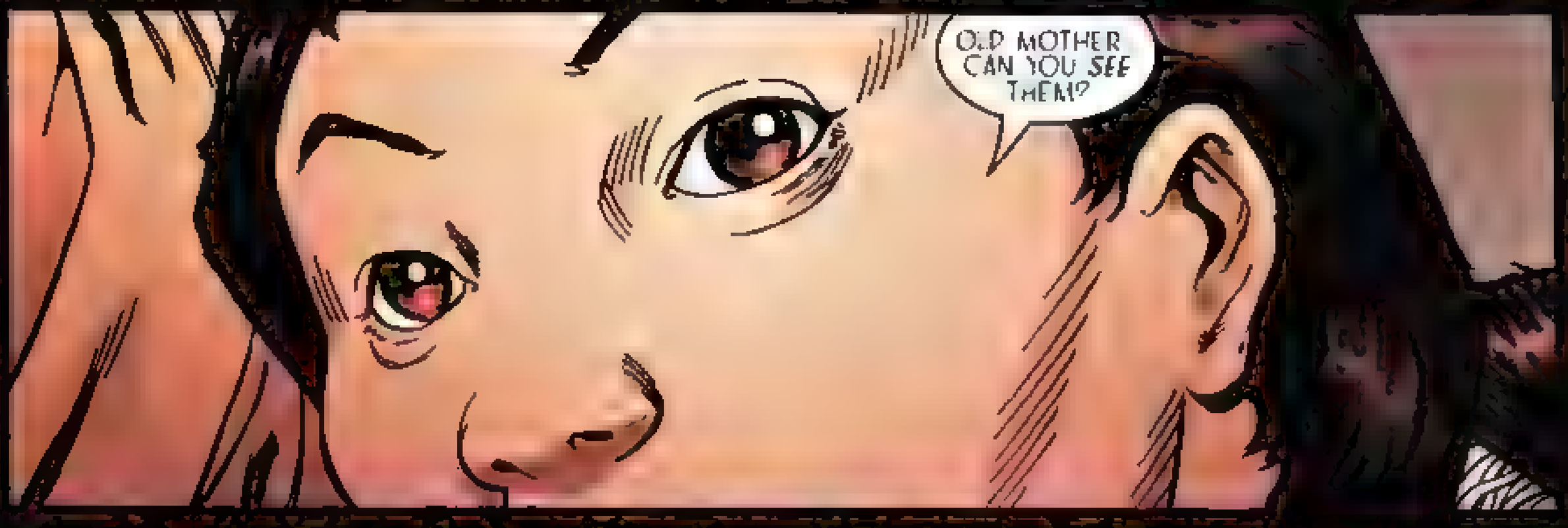
I AM NOT DOING THIS

EEK!

YOUR BAUBLE COULD NOT HOLD ME BOON SAI HONG!

AND I FOUND OTHERS LONG IMPRISONED WITHIN

EACH WITH A SCORE TO SETTLE WITH THE LIVING


OLD MOTHER CAN YOU SEE THEM?

WE CAN ALL SEE THEM.
BOON?
YES, TIGER?
I THINK I NOW SHARE YOUR OPINIONS ON MAGIC

Storytellers

Jeff Parker
Dave Lanphear
Chris Garcia
Tom Raney
Chuck Dixon
Jeff Parker
Dave Lanphear
Chris Garcia
Tom Raney
Chuck Dixon

The CrossGen Universe created by Mark Alessi & Gina M. Villa

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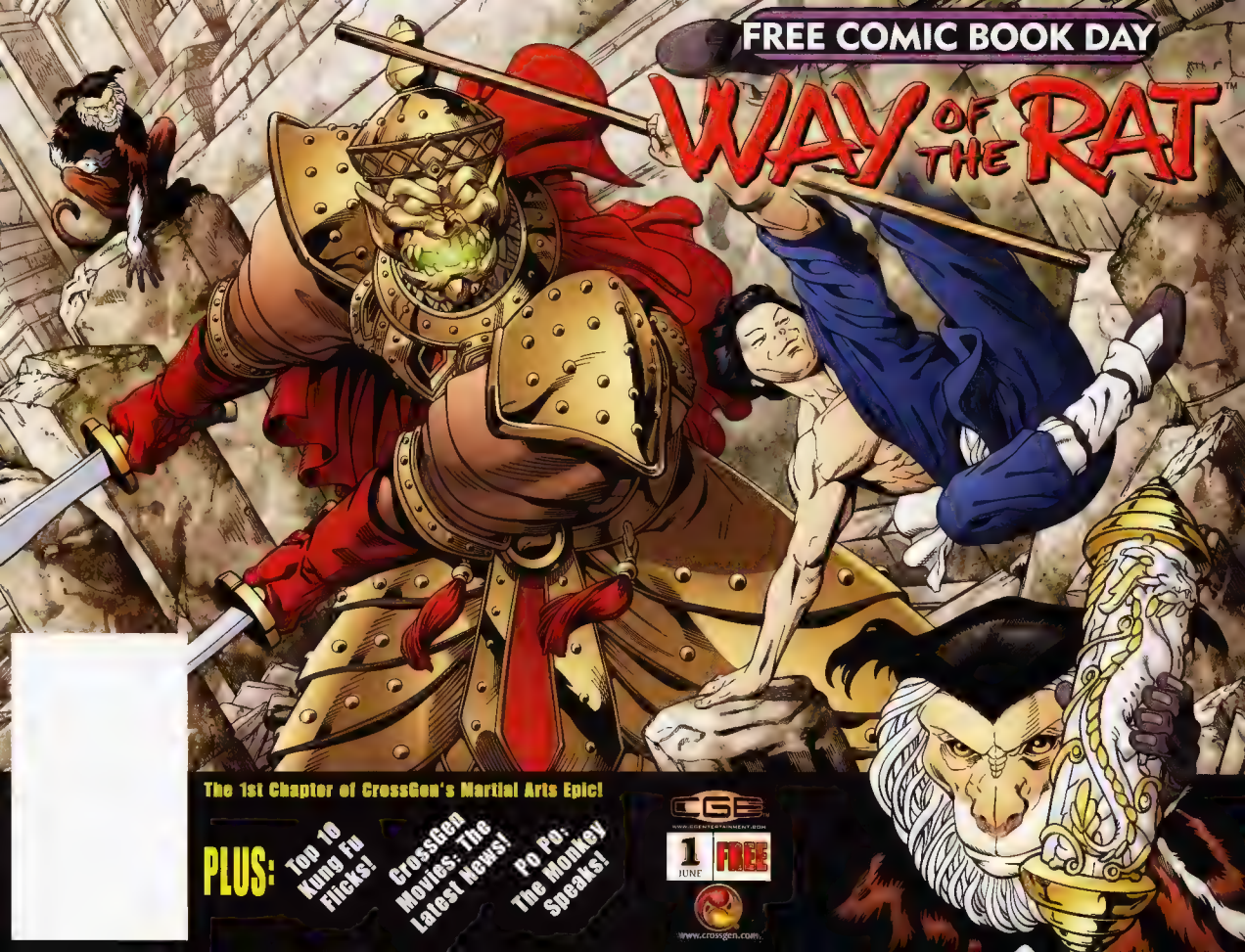
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WAY OF THE RAT™

The Monthly Comic Book!

The Walls of Zhumar
Collects Issues #1 through #6!

What's Next?

A special message from writer Chuck Dixon:

"We hope you enjoyed this complimentary copy of WAY OF THE RAT... but this chapter is only the beginning! In future issues you can follow Boon Sai Hong and Po Po's adventures as they face assassins, thieves and a barbarian horde!

The secrets of the Silken Ghost will be revealed and the mystical scroll that Boon stole will open a gateway to a world of demonic dragons! Plus, ghosts and curses and palace intrigue!

Yes, the journey of Boon and his furry pal is just starting! Thanks for reading and we hope to see you again in Zhumar!"

CHUCK

Sitting on Top of the World With Po Po

Hollywood's sardonic spiritual master is now its biggest star — and loving it. By R. W. Boyd & Chuck Dixon

"I have a problem with faking humility." Po Po says with a wry smile leaning back in his Eames chair on the balcony of his house that hangs vertiginously over Hollywood. From this angle, one can catch a glimpse of the enormous **WAY OF THE RAT** billboard at the corner of Sunset and La Brea, dominated by Po Po's 50 foot high portrait. Po Po's career has skyrocketed since the release of **WAY OF THE RAT** which coincided with his platinum duet album of American standards with Norah Jones, and his revolutionary self-help manual, *You're Doomed to Mediocrity*. Rarely has a trifecta of brilliance appeared so suddenly from nowhere.

But has it really been nowhere? Po Po's fans (a rapidly growing army) now know that the superior simian has appeared in small roles on movies and television for nearly a decade. Episodes of *Dharma & Greg*, *Frasier*, *The Drew Carey Show* and an especially harrowing episode of *Oz* are matched by minor but memorable roles in *American Pie 2*, *Gladiator* and *The Hours*. Perhaps more important, Po Po Seminar Training (PPST) has been a popular instructional regimen for Hollywood glitterati attempting to be slightly less pathetic for more than 10 years. Out of nowhere? We just haven't been watching closely.

You've become a bit of a fixture on the party scene, which seems strange for a spiritual master.

I am fascinated by all manner of human behavior. Actually, that's a lie. I find most humans tiresome and the Hollywood variety particularly intolerable. But there's usually an open bar.

Who are your friends in Hollywood?

A contradiction in terms. One cannot have true friends here. Many are eager to associate with Po Po as I am rising in popularity among the hoi polloi. I mostly keep to myself. Although, I did break into Sean Penn's house while he was in Baghdad. He has, um, *had* quite a wine collection.

WAY OF THE RAT was a breakthrough for you. But initially George Clooney was scheduled to play the sardonic monkey role. How did you end up with it?

Clooney gave into that basest of human urges: to direct. He was drawn to directing that recent film about a former game show host. It was a very special film for him. "Special" in this case meaning that only his immediate family attended it. This cleared a path for me to make my star turn.

You play most of your scenes naked. Did you feel any reluctance about that?

Po Po is not ashamed of his body!

So you weren't worried about showing it all on screen?

I did have to go on a crash diet. After all, the camera adds twenty pounds and that's 75% of my body weight! I'd look like a house.

You are well known for counseling the cream of Hollywood at your PPST seminars. And yet you are also known as a heavy drinker. How do you reconcile these two sides of yourself, the spiritual master and the party "animal"?

It is only my contact with humans that forces me to retreat to the bottle. *You* spend a weekend talking Calista Flockhart off a ledge and see if you don't go facedown in the Merlot. I mean, I *deserved* a bender after one of Sylvester Stallone's two-hour crying jags. Counseling emotionally retarded nitwits isn't as easy as it looks.

What about the room you set on fire at Chateau Marmont?

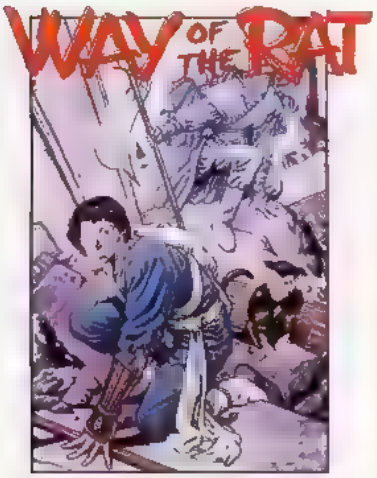
That story has been blown way out of proportion. Shannon Doherty complained she was cold and Charlize Theron suggested a fire. There wasn't an actual fireplace in the room so I improvised. It was Kate Hudson who panicked and called the fire department. Po Po had it under control. But frankly, I don't see how that's anyone's business.

I think readers want to know, but it's your interview. What are you working on now?

I've turned to screenwriting. How hard can it be? Did you see *Just Married*? I mean they let Ben Affleck write movies!

WHAT'S YOUR PASSION?

MARTIAL ARTS



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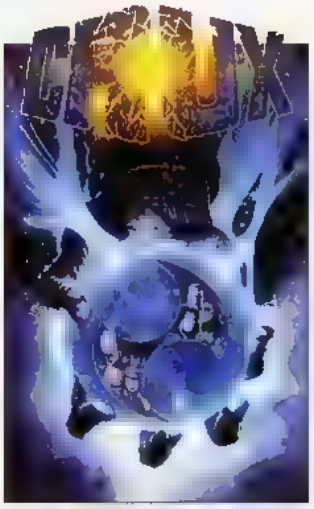

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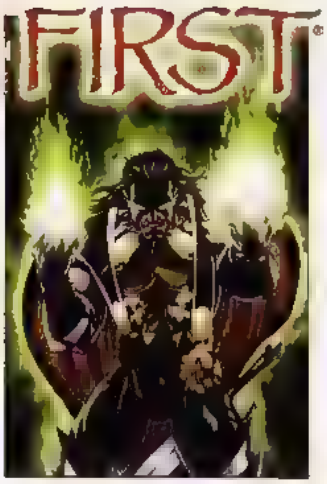

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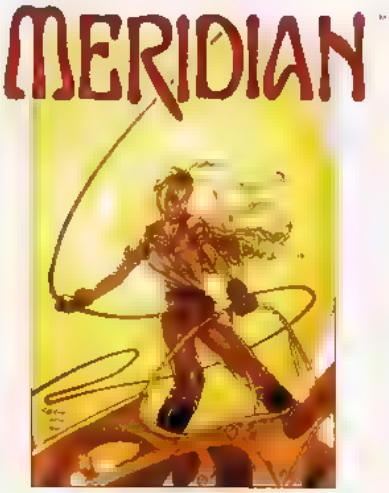

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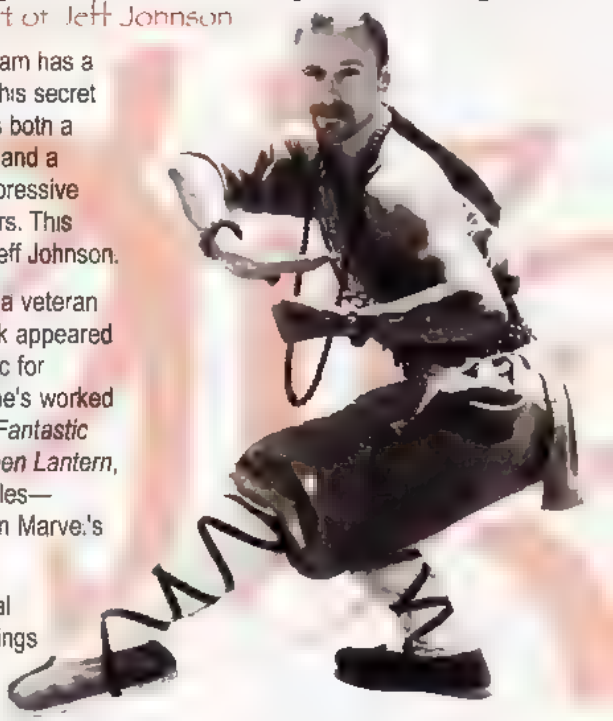
MONTHLY FROM
CROSSGEN COMICS

Drawing and Fighting

The martial comics art of Jeff Johnson



The **WAY OF THE RAT** team has a secret weapon. They use this secret weapon to give their series both a subtle layer of authenticity and a highly visual, unusually expressive way of portraying characters. This secret weapon is named Jeff Johnson.

At 34, Johnson is already a veteran comics artist. His first work appeared in 1992 in a 3-D Kull comic for Blackthorne. Since then, he's worked on *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Fantastic Four*, *Justice League*, *Green Lantern*, *Jonny Quest*, and other titles—including a 25-issue run on Marvel's *Wonder Man*.

But beyond his professional achievements, Johnson brings something extra to **WAY OF THE RAT**. San Francisco native Johnson studied aikido for seven years in Berkeley. There are many styles of aikido, and the style Johnson practices is Seishindo, the "water way." Aikido is a Japanese martial art developed by Morihei Ueshiba in the early part of the 20th Century. Ueshiba created aikido after studying various martial arts for many years while simultaneously venturing on a spiritual quest. Consequently, aikido has a strong spiritual aspect. Paradoxically for a martial art, aikido is grounded in a search for peace and harmony among people. And as a fighting style, aikido focuses on using an opponent's energy to gain control over them or to throw them away from you, rather than on punching or kicking opponents.

The characters in **WAY OF THE RAT** don't employ characters in aikido — it would be quite odd for a story set in the equivalent of medieval China to be practicing a 20th Century Japanese martial art. But Johnson is very well-versed in other martial arts styles, and weaves this knowledge into **WAY OF THE RAT** very subtly. For example, each of the main characters practices his or her own style of martial arts, and that style reflects the personality of the character. Boon, for example, has a rough-and-ready street style of fighting, but at its base is Shaolin kung fu, a Buddhist fighting style. Among other things, this means that Boon uses no killing moves. Boon may be a rascal and an opportunist, but at heart he's a hero and not a killer.

The Princess employs Wushu, which is the official government-approved style of martial arts in China. (It also happens to be Jet Li's style.) And this reflects on her status as a royal princess of the empire. The Silken Ghost uses an airborne style, employing lots of kicks and spinning, which is based not on strength but on speed and finesse. Here we have a style that, in a way, is a clue to the hidden identity of this mysterious character.

So when you read **WAY OF THE RAT**, you not only get rollicking adventure, great action scenes, and detailed historical research, you also get a very deep grounding in martial arts. And a talking monkey. And seriously, what more could you ask for from a comic book?

—Robert Boyd

KUNG FU KLASSIKS!

A scene from *Iron Monkey* ©2001 Miramax Films, Media Asia and Golden Harvest

"I'm interested in the martial arts film genre, but don't know where to start!"

Chuck Dixon and Jeff Johnson take you on a guided tour of their favorite kung fu flicks

Blade Of Fury
Directed by, and starring, Sammo Hung in an unusual dramatic role as a swordsman of the Manchu Dynasty in its twilight. Blistering swordplay and violent action as Sammo defends his nation against the encroachment of foreign devils —*Chuck*

Burning Paradise
Directed by Ringo Lam and starring Willie Chi and Sheng Yang. Lam's only martial arts flick. Big action as two legendary Shaolin monks are taken prisoner by some outcase and held in a vast subterranean fortress called the Red Lotus temple. —*Chuck*

Enter the Dragon
Starring Bruce Lee, John Saxon and Jim Kelly. No list would be complete without this movie. —*Jeff*

The Five Deadly Venoms
This has to be the quintessential Venoms film. They are at the height of their powers and this movie is designed for all of them to show off their individual skills. —*Jeff*

In The Line Of Duty 3
Directed by Arthur Wong. The third film in this great series with Cynthia Khan as a butt-kicking Hong Kong police woman on the trail of two crazy-scary Japanese jewel thieves. —*Chuck*

Iron Monkey
With Donnie Yen, Jean Wang, and Tsang Sze Man and directed by Yuen Wo Ping. I think this is the best martial arts movie to come out in a very long time. The action is superb and it is beautifully filmed. —*Jeff*

Ninja's Deadly Trap
This is a classic example of the kind of movie that The Venoms made famous. Together, Chiang Sheng, Lu Feng, Wei Pai, Sun Shein, Lo Meng, Kuo Chu., and Ti Lung made dozens of films over the years and even though the cast of characters is pretty standard this one stands out as one of my all time favorite martial arts movies. —*Jeff*

Shaolin Rescuers
More awesome Venoms action and it ends with one of the greatest group fight scenes ever filmed. —*Jeff*

Thunderbolt
Directed by Gordon Chan and starring Jackie Chan. Jackie's a race car driver in this one and has to battle a rival race team to save his sister and father. Awesome fight in a Tokyo pachinko parlor as well as insane action inside a mobile home suspended over a junkyard by a crane! —*Chuck*

Tiger Cage 2
Directed by Yuen Wo Ping and starring Donnie Yen and Cynthia Khan. An over-the-top cop and a female lawyer are mistakenly suspected of bank robbery and must go on the lam to prove their innocence. A thin plot strung with amazing, rapid action fight sequences —*Chuck*

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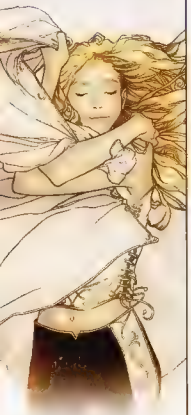
An Evil Uncle.
A Missing Boyfriend.
A Changing Body.

Who Ever Said Growing Up Was Easy?

MERIDIAN



"Touches some of the same nerves that the Harry Potter books do–with a talented, lonely child beset by magical dangers."

—Comics Buyer's Guide

Barbara Kesel
Steve McNiven
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MONTHLY FROM
CROSSGEN COMICS

ZEN AND THE ART OF COMICS-TO-FILM

Michael Uslan likes getting hit with the tough questions. That's a good thing, too, because as the executive producer of the *Batman* film franchise for Warner Bros. — and now the exclusive executive producer for all of CrossGeneration Comics' film and television projects — he's been getting a lot of them lately. His answers demonstrate why he is one of the preeminent film executives in the business today.

Uslan who started his career writing *Batman* and *The Shadow* for DC Comics back in the '60s, has had a long, distinguished career in the entertainment business. Uslan went on from there to graduate from law school and obtain a Master's Degree in education to boot, traveling to Hollywood to become a business affairs attorney for MGM/United Artists. There, he handled deal-making on such films as *Rocky II* and *Raging Bull*. After tucking some credits under his belt, he returned to DC and bought, with his partner, veteran film producer Benjamin Melnicker, the film rights to *Batman*. He fought for more than a decade to get just the right team, just the right script and hit just the right note with *Batman*, finally succeeding with the release of the record-breaking 1989 hit movie, directed by Tim Burton, and executive produced by Uslan and Melnicker. Since then, Uslan has produced movies, television series and even won an Emmy Award for his animated series *Where in the World is Carmen SanDiego?*

Today, Uslan and his company Branded Entertainment have taken on another seemingly difficult task: take the entire slate of stories and characters from CrossGen Comics, a line barely a couple of years old, and make film and television deals for them that not only preserve the integrity of the stories but also by-pass the typical development hell associated with these types of projects and get them into production.

Impossible? In just more than 17 months, Uslan has helped engineer one of the most remarkable campaigns in movie history, signing up 11 CrossGen properties (at press time) to development and production deals. **MYSTIC**, **SIGIL**, **SCION**, **MERIDIAN**, **THE FIRST**, **CRUX**, **ROUTE 666**, **NEGATION**, **WAY OF THE RAT**, **BRATH** and the Code 6 title **THE CROSSOVERS** are all in development for either a feature film or a television production thanks to the efforts of Uslan and his Vice President of Production, F.J. DeSanto.

So the first hard question Uslan usually gets is, "How do you move that fast amongst the snail's pace of film development in Hollywood?"

"First of all, the comics are incredible," he said. "For instance, when I want to show anyone in Hollywood an example of CrossGen's work, I take out a copy of **SOJOURN** #19, which I think is one of the most beautiful comics I have ever laid eyes on. The quality of every series CrossGen produces is so far-and-away superior than anything else out on the market that the comics do a good job of selling themselves."

The next hard question was how to set up a process that met the needs of producers as well as comics creators like the folks at CrossGen.

"CrossGen is doing something nobody else is doing," he said. "By carefully choosing the companies and talent they want to be associated with, then allowing those people with talent, money and clout to get on board, and giving them the creative freedom to do what they need to do without hampering them with complex approval rights, provides them an amazing sense of freedom. But, instead of running away from the source material, CrossGen's unique assets (great comics and a studio filled with talented comics creators) inspire filmmakers to come back to CrossGen for support and creative feedback, because they actually have respect for the comics and the comics creators."

Inspiring talent like Chuck Russell, director of movies like *The Mask*, *Eraser* and *The Scorpion King*, to become part of

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this process is both a creative coup and a business victory, according to Usian Russell is now attached to three CrossGen properties, including a feature film vers on of **WAY OF THE RAT** After visiting CrossGen Russell's inspiration to commit to the feature film version of **WAY OF THE RAT** was instrumental in cementing the deal that has the move set up as a Castle Rock/DreamWorks feature film produced by Frank Darabont (*The Shawshank Redemption, The Green Mile*) and written and directed by Russe

How that process worked was a reve at on to **WAY OF THE RAT** comic book wr ter Chuck D xon

"Chuck Russe has been here to Tampa on two occas ons to talk to me and the entire **WAY OF THE RAT** team about the series and his plans for t," D xon said. "And we exchange e-mails and phone calls on a regular basis. His enthusiasm for Boon and Po Po and the rest is equal to our own. And I can't stress enought how exc t ng that is. To have a true showman and so d filmmaker ke Chuck w ling to invest the next two years of his fe in something Jeff

SPIRITS *CAN* KILL!

FROM THE PAGES OF WAY OF THE RAT

THE SILKEN GHOST

Chuck Dixon • Will Rosado • Chuck Gibson • Michael Atoch

KNOCKING 'EM DEAD IN MAY!

Tom, Chris and I came up with is a unique event."

Ron Marz, who has been working with Chuck Russel on the film adaptation of **SCION**, has been around comics a long time, as well, but he has never seen a comic-book-oriented film developed quite like this.

"All of the writers here produced script treatments as initial pitch pieces," Marz said. "In my case, the treatment added some new elements to the story as well as blending in a good deal of the comic story. The film story in **SCION** as it's shaping up, is a combination of the comic, some material from the treatment, and a lot of ideas Chuck brought to the table, which I have to say dovetail beautifully with everything else. I believe Chuck's planning on writing the **SCION** script himself, just as he did with the **WAY OF THE RAT** script, so I'm sure we'll continue to talk as the process moves along." DeSanto added that the creative partnership isn't the only thing that has contributed to the CrossGen/Hollywood synergies.

"In what has to be an unprecedented relationship between Hollywood and Comics, CrossGen has given us full access to all the remarkable talent housed at the studio in Tampa," DeSanto said. "And when I say talent, I don't mean just the writers and the artists, I mean the entire staff of CrossGen who work with us daily to make sure our job goes as smoothly as possible. Whether it's designing concept art, writing a treatment, or rushing out the latest issue of a CrossGen comic to a director, writer or studio, the CrossGen staff always delivers without fail. The words 'no' and 'can't' don't seem to be in the CrossGen vocabulary. This is a unified effort between Branded and CrossGen and I think the results so far speak volumes about how effective our team is."

—Tony Panaccio

SOUND EFFECTS!

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Po Po's WAY OF THE RAT Horoscope

RAT *Born in 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996*
You are creative, engaging and magnanimous to those close to you. And yet, you are quick to anger and hypercritical. And frankly, you are a felon and an opportunist. All your friends say so. Those born under the sign of the Rat would be happiest in the fields of thievery, con-artistry and law. You are most compatible with people born in the years of the Dog, Monkey, and Ox. Stay away from Dragons.

OX *Born in 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997*
A pompous blowhard, you are always chosen to lead based on the ignorance of those around you. You are conservative, methodical, and will go to extreme lengths to avoid making a decision. Guard against letting other people know your opinions, or even letting them suspect you of having opinions at all. The Ox would be successful as a vizier, a tech support person, or an employee of the Department of Motor Vehicles. You are most compatible with Snakes, Roosters, and Rats. Avoid other Oxen.

TIGER *Born in 1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1986, 1998*
You are sensitive, emotional, and capable of great love. In short, you are a wuss. Wuss, wuss, wuss! However, you have a tendency to be very stubborn about what you think is right, particularly regarding the minutiae of ancient science fiction television programs. Your sign shows you would be excellent as a meek, little-noticed employee who is actually a walking time bomb, a gigolo or a crime victim. Tigers are most compatible with Horses, Dragons, and Dogs. Roosters are not your friends.

RABBIT *Born in 1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999*
You are a completely obsequious glad-hander. Initially, you charm people with your compliments and sycophancy, but ultimately they feel slightly creeped-out by your constant attempts to be ingratiating. An excellent lickspittle, you would be a great capo, entourage member or vice-president. Rabbits are most compatible with those born in the years of the Goat, Pig, and Dog. There is no point in associating with Dragons.

DRAGON *Born in 1916, 1928, 1940, 1952, 1964, 1976, 1988, 2000*
Full of vitality and enthusiasm, the Dragon is a popular individual who never backs down from a dare, no matter how dangerous or humiliating. You are a loud-mouth, have a tendency for drunken camaraderie, and are a little too touchy-feely for comfort. People are sick of you passing out at their parties, and your back has been permanently damaged from sleeping in bathtubs. You would be a great ward heeler, bar fly or fraternity brother. They are compatible with Rats, Monkeys, and Roosters. You will never meet a Snake, so don't worry about them.

SNAKE *Born in 1917, 1929, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1977, 1989, 2001*
Charming and brilliant, you are a romantic and are guided by your intuition. Your inability to get a real job is a constant embarrassment to your parents. Make sure they stay out of your room and don't take any guff from them about being "a full-grown man" or "35 years old, for pete's sake." The Snake would be most content as paid visionary, an idea man, a guru or some other job requiring no actual labor. They are most compatible with the Ox and Goat. Roosters get all the jobs that rightfully should be yours.

HORSE *Born in 1918, 1930, 1942, 1954,1966, 1978, 1990, 2002*
Your infinite capacity for uncomplaining hard work makes you the perfect doormat. Others will use your gullibility to get ahead. That's OK though, because you can always wallow in your feelings of bruised self-righteousness. Your sign suggests success as an executive assistant, a public school teacher or a martyr. They are most compatible with Tigers, Dogs, and Goats. Stay away from Rats.

GOAT *Born in 1919, 1931, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, 2003*
If you didn't alienate people from the moment you met them, you'd be quite popular. You have great taste and lots of money—it's too bad about your personality, but two out of three ain't bad. Your hate for all mankind is fully reciprocated, but at least you have the comfort of lots and lots of possessions. You would be best as hateful old miser or a corporate office supplies clerk. They are compatible with Rabbits, Pigs, and Horses. Roosters bother you.

MONKEY. *Born in 1920, 1932, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992*
You are very intelligent and a very clever wit. Because of your extraordinary nature and magnetic personality, you are always well-liked. The Monkey however must guard against being sucked dry by losers, sycophants, time-wasters, glad-handers and other lesser persons (i.e. everyone). Your sign promises success in any field you try. Frankly, no one is good enough—but if worse comes to worse, Monkeys can tolerate Rats.

ROOSTER *Born in 1921, 1933, 1945, 1957, 1969, 1981, 1993*
The Rooster is opinionated and shrewd—he will take advantage of anyone for the slightest and most temporary of gains. Your closest friends don't trust you. You are flashy and extravagant, favoring loud ties and plaid suits. Born under this sign you should be happy as a used car dealer, a public stock analyst or a corporate auditor. They are most compatible with Ox, Snake, and Dragon. Don't bother with Goats.

DOG *Born in 1922, 1934, 1946, 1958, 1970, 1982, 1994*
The Dog will never let you down, except when you need him the most. Your honesty and faithfulness is only matched by your incompetence. Your "aw shucks, fellas" routine is getting old, fast. You would make an excellent rear echelon military officer, subcontractor or Viscount. You are compatible with those born in the Years of the Horse, Tiger, and Rabbit. You will go broke buying drinks for Dragons.

PIG *Born in 1923, 1935, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983, 1995*
You are a likable intellectual—goal-oriented, sincere, tolerant and honest. However, you are incredibly naive and gullible. The Pig would be best as a fellow traveler, a party loyalist (any party), or a university professor. They are most compatible with Rabbits and Goats. If an Ox offers you a position as special advisor, turn it down unless the pay is really, really excellent.

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The frontier city of Zhumar, last outpost of the Empire where civilization and barbarism clash. All caravan roads lead here. Every wild tribe covets its treasures.

Boon Sai Hong is a common thief who calls the mountain stronghold home. On one regrettable night in his criminal career he stole two artifacts from an old librarian: the Ring of Staffs, which gives its wearer instant mastery over any staffed weapon, and the Book Of The Hell Of The Hungry Dragons, a scroll which is an actual gateway to Hell.

His only guide through the misadventures he has brought upon himself is an enchanted monkey named Po Po.

For a humble thief of uncertain parentage, the adventures of Boon Sai Hong have had influence in the highest places of the Shinacean Empire. Even now, in the gardens of the Imperial Palace, events in the dark of night threaten to change the world forever.

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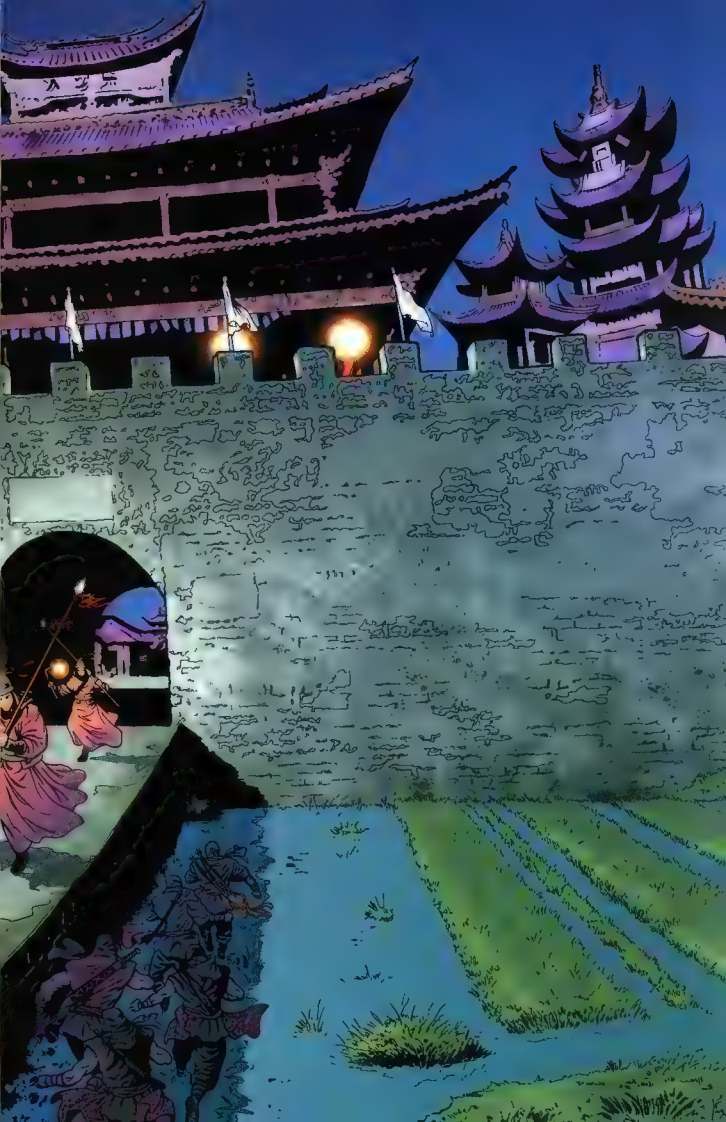
"The brightest moon
casts the deepest shadows."
Wing Tei Sun

THE IMPERIAL PALACE OF THE MOST AUGUST EMPEROR OF SHINACEA

THE IMPERIAL PALACE OF THE MOST AUGUST EMPEROR OF SHINACEA



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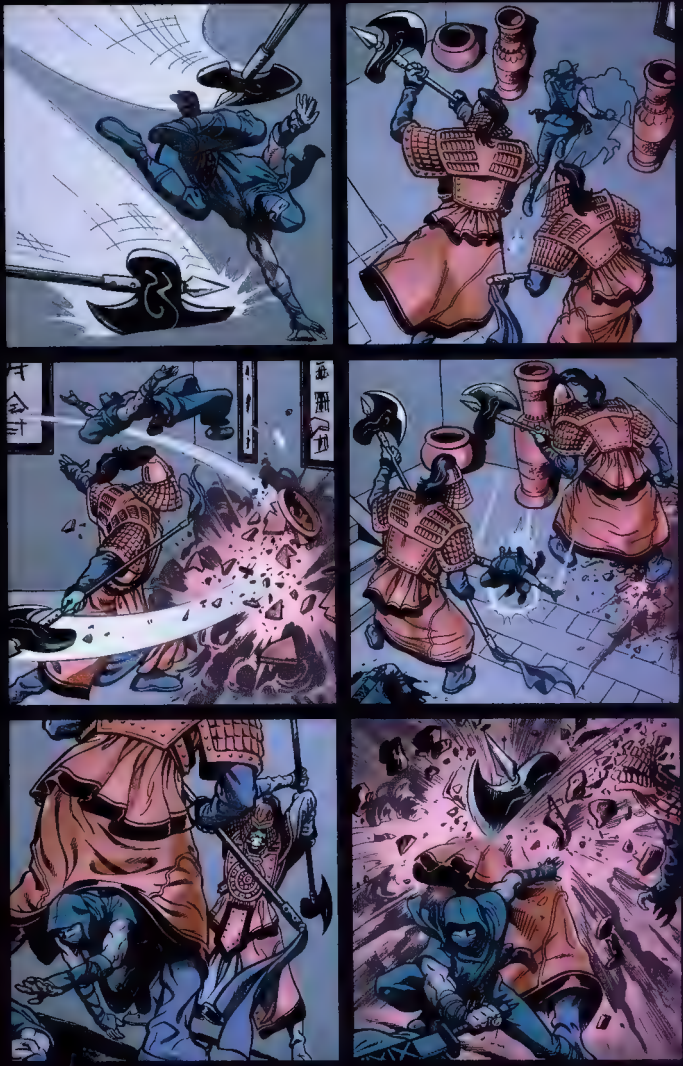

ah.
MOST SPLENDID
YOU ALONE SURVIVED THE TEST
NO SMALL THING TO SLAY AN EMPEROR
YOU SHOULD BE QUITE PROUD
THOUGH THAT SATISFACTION IS TEMPERED BY THE DEATH OF SO MANY OF YOUR BROTHERS, eh?
OH, FORGIVE MY RUDENESS ? DID NOT MEAN TO KEEP YOUR WEAPON

AFTER ALL, YOU WILL *NEED* IT TO KILL BOON SAI HONG

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Writer: Chuck Dixon

Colorist: Chris Garcia

Letterer: Dave Lanphear

Guest Inker: Drew Geraci

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His only guide through the misadventures he has brought upon himself is an enchanted monkey named Po Po.

Boon has gone from lowly scoundrel to the hero of the city by defeating in single combat the Great Bhuto Khan and turning away his warrior horde. The reluctant hero has also prevented the destruction of Zhumar by the Emperor Dragon. It was in this struggle that Princess Zheng Mai Lo was taken to the Hell Of Dragons that exists within the deadly scroll. Old Mother Po Po (no relation to the fabled monkey) attempts to free the princess from her imprisonment using the powerful magic of the Phoenix Heart. Things go awry when a horde of ghosts, long-imprisoned within the fiery gem, escape into the streets of Zhumar. Among them is the recently-departed Judge X'ain who now looks to restore himself to power from beyond the grave.

To complicate matters further, the Emperor has sent the deadliest of his assassins to find and kill Boon Sai Hong.

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YOU SOUGHT TO **IMPRISON** ME!

INSTEAD YOU GRANTED ME POWER **UNDREAMED** OF!

"Death is often a beginning."

Wing Tei Sun

WITHIN THE PHOENIX HEART LIES A WORLD OF THE DEPARTED!

IMPRISONED THERE FOR AGES INNUMERABLE WITH NOTHING BUT VENGEANCE IN THEIR HEARTS!

ALL THEY AWAITED WAS THE ONE WITH THE WILL TO LEAD THEM BACK TO THE PHYSICAL REALM!

YOUR INCANTATION *FREED* THESE PHANTOMS, OLD MOTHER

A FAULTY *TRANSLATION* MUST BE TO BLAME

I AM *JUDGE X'AIN!*

NOW I BRING *JUSTICE* TO THE *DEAD!*

YOU DO NOT *BELONG* HERE, X'AIN! YOU HOLD NO *POWER* IN THIS WORLD!

YOU WILL *RETURN* TO THE PHOENIX HEART! I SO *DEMAND!*

IT IS *YOU* WHO IS MISTAKEN, OLD CRONE

I HAVE *SEEN* THE OTHER SIDE

I HAVE *SEEN* WHAT LIES BEYOND THE GRAVE

Oh?

AND THE WORLD OF SPIRITS DOES HOLD SWAY HERE AMONG THE LIVING

THESE GRATEFUL WRAITHS WILL BE MY ARMY IN A WAR ON THOSE OF FLESH AND BONE!

YOUR ARMY?

I COMMANDED AN ARMY OF MULTITUDES CENTURIES BEFORE YOUR BIRTH!

THE EARTH SHOOK LIKE THUNDER UNDER THE HOOFBEATS OF MY CAVALRY!

HAK'AN SHAN IS NOT TO BE GIVEN ORDERS!

YOUR BONES ARE DUST AND YOUR NAME FORGOTTEN, OLD SOLDIER

BETTER THAT YOU FOLLOW THE RULE OF ONE WHO KNOWS THE WORLD AS IT IS IN THESE DAYS

SO, MY DAYS ARE PASSED, eh?

THE DAYS FLY BY LIKE LEAVES ON THE WIND!

IT MATTERS NOT WHAT THE YEARS HAVE WROUGHT IN THE WORLD OF FLESH!

I AM DEAD! YOU ARE DEAD!

TIME HAS ENDED FOR US!

NO!

CAN IT BE TWICE?

TO ME, SPIRIT BROTHERS! WE ARE FREE ONCE MORE!

THIS IS BUT THE START OF THE REIGN OF THE DEAD!

HOW CAN THIS BE?

I AM OF THE STUFF OF DREAMS. HOW CAN I BE HARMED?

DO I HAVE THESE ANSWERS?

GHOSTS MAY *WOUND* GHOSTS, IDIOT JUDGE!

EH?

YOU HAVE *BROUGHT* THIS EVIL UPON US ALL!

"AND IF IT CANNOT BE CONTAINED, IT WILL *GROW*!

"AND WITH *ENOUGH* POWER, THESE SPIRIT CREATURES MAY *THREATEN* THE LIVING!"

A CALL TO THE DEAD *CHAINED* TO THIS WORLD!

AWAKEN FROM YOUR SLUMBER!

RISE FROM YOUR REST AND FREE YOURSELF FROM THE BONDS OF ASH AND EARTH!

WHY DO YOU *PRAY* FOR YOUR MOTHER?

SHE WISHED US ONLY *ILL* WHEN IN LIFE!

SO MANY *PROBLEMS* PLAGUE THE LIVING, DEAR WIFE

AND YOU *WASTE* YOUR WORDS IN PRAYERS FOR THAT POISON-TONGUED *SHREW!*

IT CANNOT BE!

THE DEAD *RISE!*

MERCIFUL GODS!

NO!

MOTHER?

YOU ARE STILL MARRIED TO THIS LAZY PIG?

YOU COULD HAVE DONE BETTER, DAUGHTER!

AAA!!

HAVE YOU A JOB?

GO AWAY!

HAVE YOU GIVEN ME GRAND-CHILDREN?

HELP!

HAVE YOU GROWN FATTER?

THE CITY IS *CURSED!*

THE DEAD *RETURN!*

IT IS NO *PLACE* FOR MEN TO LIVE!

WE *LEAVE* ZHUMAR!

NO ONE STANDS IN OUR WAY!

TURN *BACK* TO YOUR *HOMES!*

BY *ORDERS* OF MINISTER HYUN!

THE GATES OF ZHUMAR ARE *LOCKED!* THEY WILL *REMAIN* SO!

ATTEMPT TO *LEAVE* THE CITY BY *ANY* MEANS AND YOU WILL *DIE!*

YOU CANNOT STOP US!

WE WILL NOT BE *FORCED* TO LIVE IN THIS PLACE!

WE ARE NOT *PRISONERS* IN OUR HOMES!

STORM THE GATE!

FIRST ORDER!

FIRE!

SECOND ORDER!

FIRE!

RELOAD WEAPONS!

"SPIRITS OF MY ANCESTORS, *HEAR* MY PLEA"

I AM TASKED WITH SO *MANY* WORLDLY MATTERS I *SEEK* YOUR GUIDANCE AND SERENE WISDOM

HEAVEN AND HELL CONVERGE UPON ZHUMAR AND I AM *UNCERTAIN* OF WHAT PATH TO TAKE

WHERE IS MY SON?

OH?

GRANDFATHER?

WHO ARE YOU?

I AM TEI SU. YOUR GRAND-DAUGHTER

BUT MY GRANDCHILD IS BUT AN INFANT

MUCH TIME HAS PASSED SINCE LAST WE MET

WHERE IS MY SON? WHERE IS WING TEI SU?

HE HAS DIED, GRANDFATHER

NO

BUT WHERE IS HIS SPIRIT? I HAVE SEARCHED AND SEARCHED

HE IS IN THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY DRAGONS

NOOOO-

WING WOULD NEVER LISTEN—IT WAS HIS CURIOSITY THAT DAMNED HIM, NO?

IT WAS BEYOND HIS CONTROL, GRANDFATHER

IT IS A TIME OF CHAOS

"EVERYTHING IS IN *TUMULT*"

LEAVE ME!

LEAVE THIS PLACE!

HUNGRY SO HUNGRY

YOU ARE ***UNWELCOME*** HERE!

GO HAUNTING ***ELSEWHERE,*** PHANTOM!

HUNGRY -

AND TO THINK I *RELISHED* THE PROSPECT OF RULING THIS CITY

"WHAT A FOOL I WAS"

WHAT IS TO BECOME OF ME?

NO MORE FORM THAN A PUFF OF SMOKE

YOU MUST HELP ME, BOON SAI HONG YOU ARE THE SAVIOR OF ZHUMAR, A HERO

CAN YOU NOT SAVE ME? CAN YOU NOT RESTORE ME TO FLESH?

IS THAT TOO GREAT A FAVOR FOR ONE OF YOUR STRENGTH?

SHUT UP!

SHUT UP!

I AM TO *HELP* YOU? I AM TO FEEL *SORRY* FOR YOU?

YOU WERE GOING TO LEAD AN *ARMY* OF EVIL *GHOSTS* AGAINST THE CITY!

NOW YOU WANT MY *SYMPATHY*?

WELL

I AM GOING BACK TO SLEEP AND YOU MAY GO BACK TO HELL!

BOON?

I AM WITHOUT FORM I AM WITHOUT FRIENDS.

WHO MOURNS FOR JUDGE X'AIN?

EH?

YOU THERE.

BE GONE FROM HERE, ASSASSIN!

SPARE YOUR VICTIM OR SUFFER MY WRATH!

HA!

YOU CANNOT KILL WHAT IS ALREADY DEAD!

HA HA HA!

FLEE WHILE YOU STILL MAY, VILLAIN!

OH?

DID YOU NOT HEAR ME?

LEAVE HIM BE!

HE IS MY ONLY CHANCE AT RESURRECTION!

=UHHH!=

=GUNH!=

CAN IT BE?

IT IS TRUE!

I AM FLESH ONCE MORE!

I AM FLESH! HEE HEE HEE HEE!

WILL THIS PHANTOM *NEVER* STILL HIS TONGUE?

Storytellers

CHUCK DIXON

JEFF JOHNSON

DAVE LANPHEAR

CHRIS GARCIA

TOM RYDER

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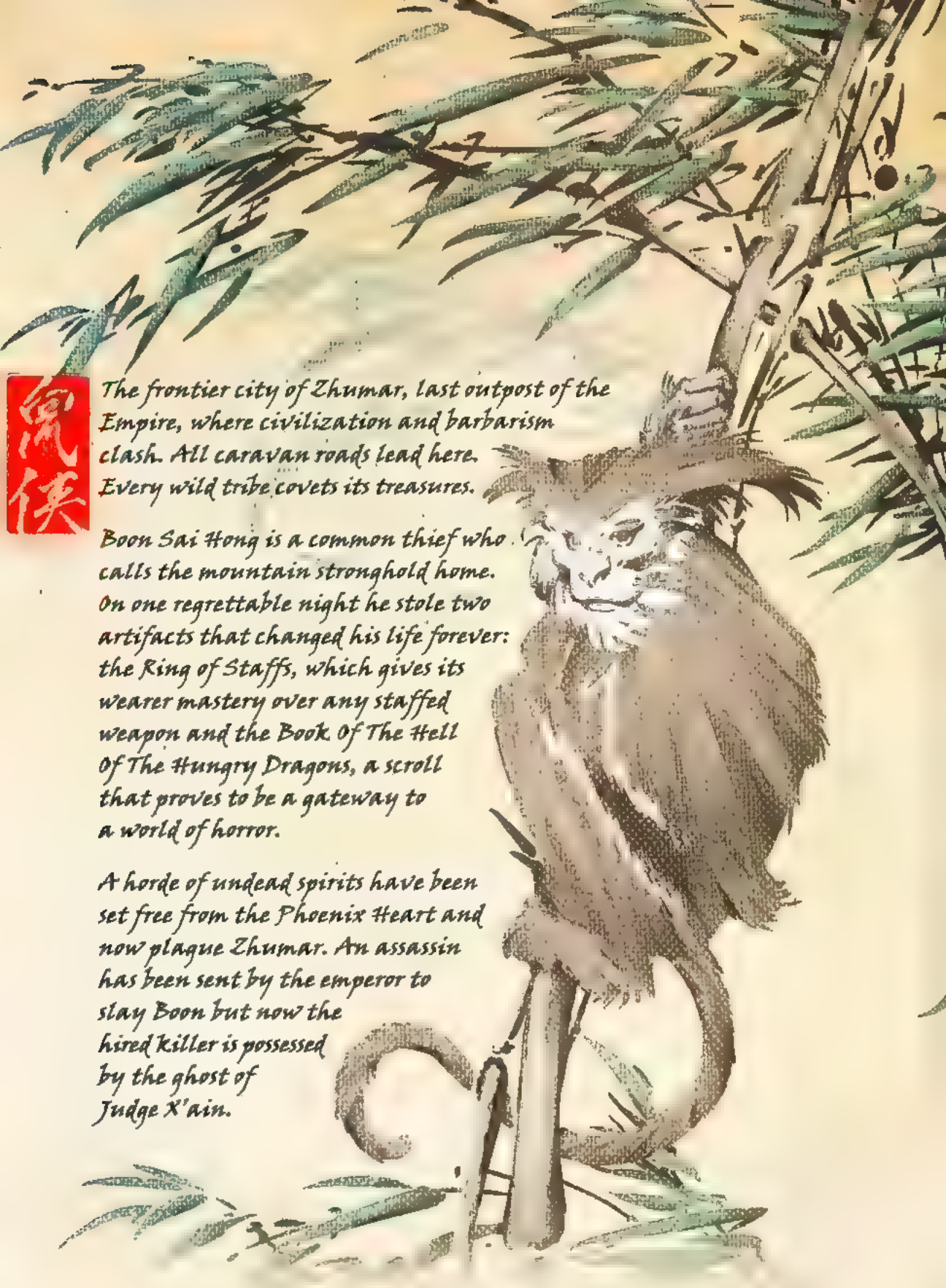

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A horde of undead spirits have been set free from the Phoenix Heart and now plague Zhumar. An assassin has been sent by the emperor to slay Boon but now the hired killer is possessed by the ghost of Judge X'ain.

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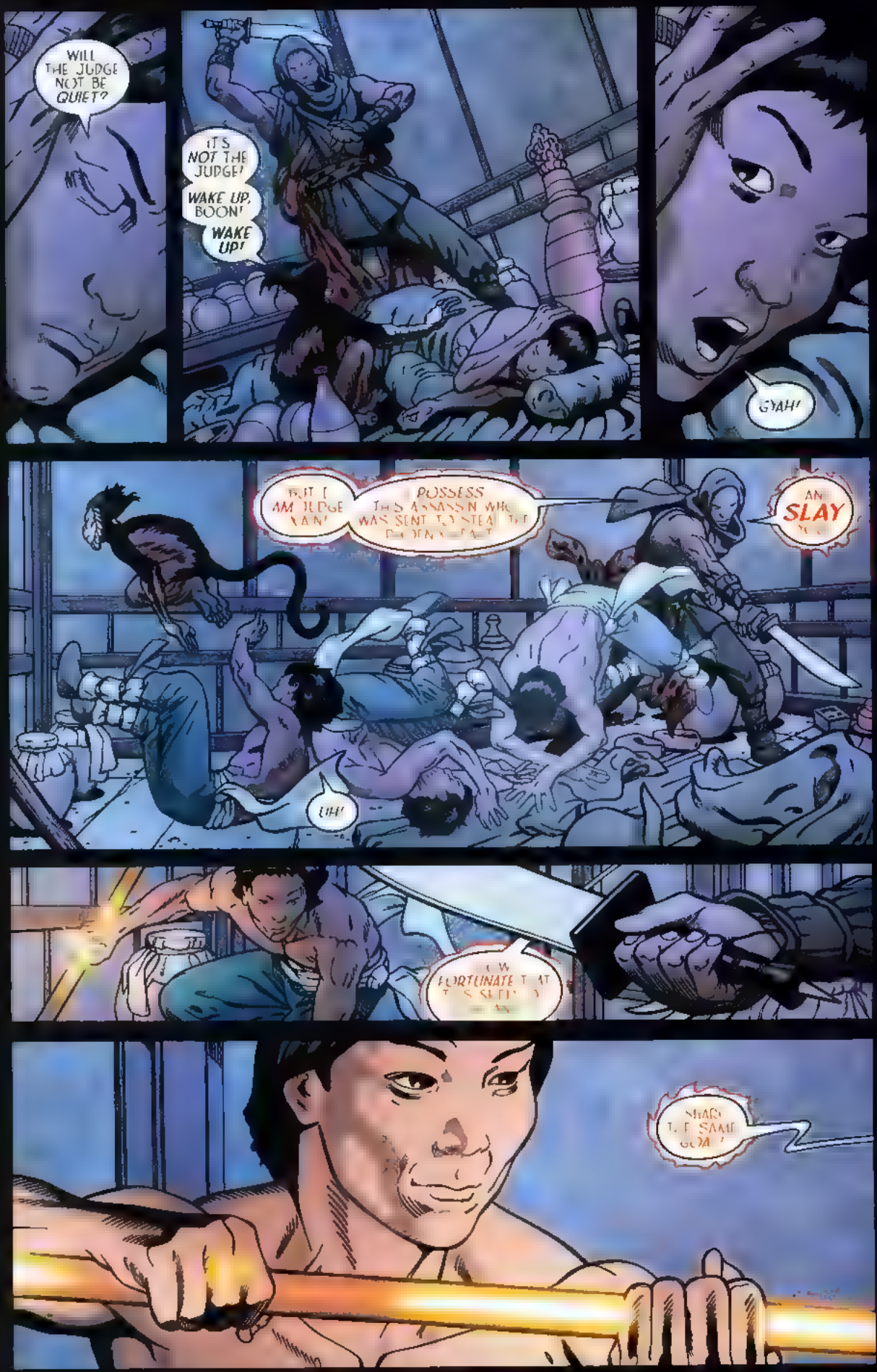
I AM MADE FLESH!
NO LONGER A GHOST!
I CAN FEEL!
I CAN TASTE!
"Fear is the source of all sin. All the evil of the world may be found in a soul without courage."
Wing Tei Sun


WILL THE JUDGE NOT BE QUIET?
IT'S NOT THE JUDGE!
WAKE UP, BOON!
WAKE UP!
GYAH!
POSSESS
SLAY
UH!
FORTUNATE

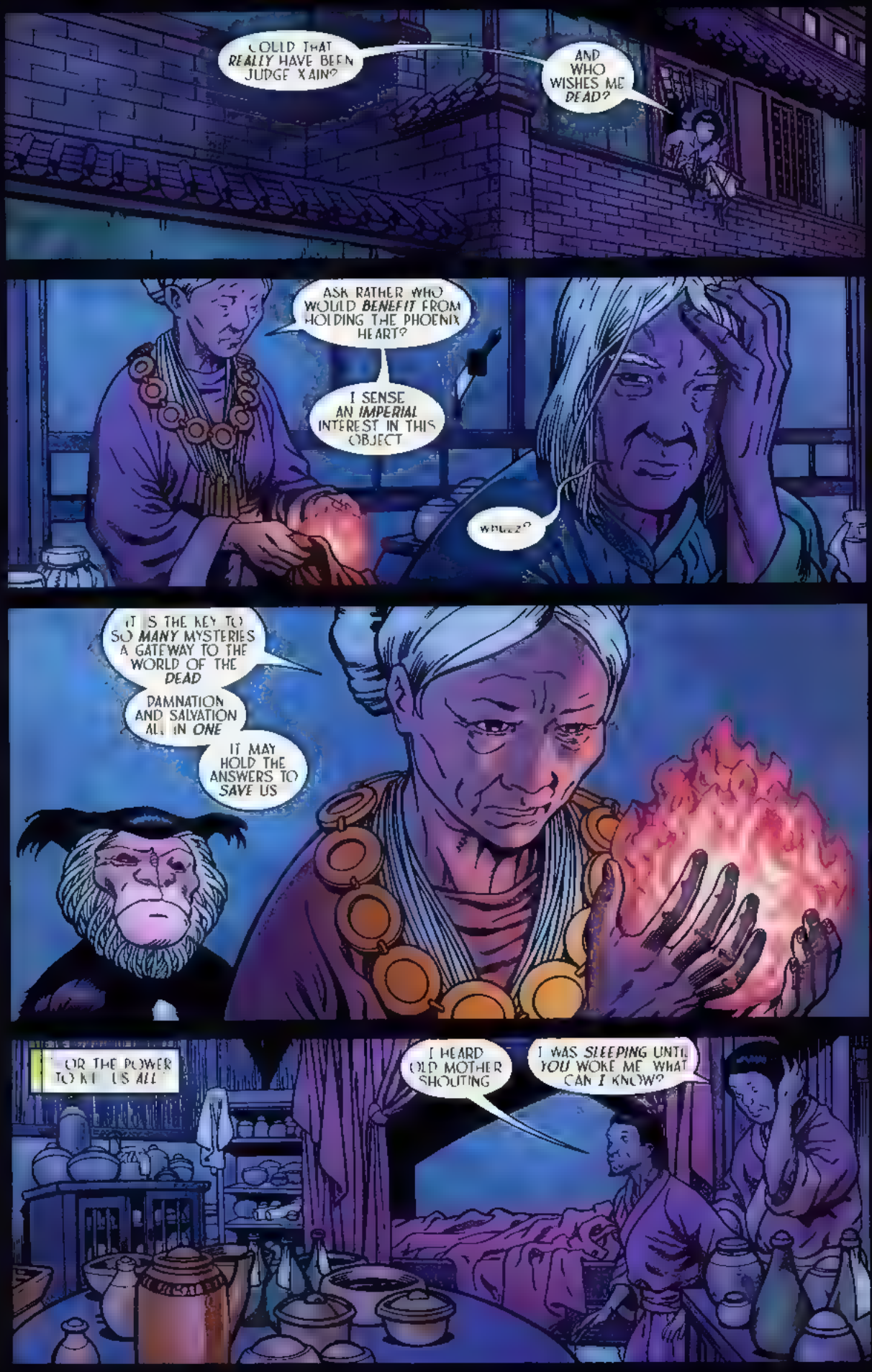
WHY DO YOU WANT ME DEAD, JUDGE?
AND WHY DOES YOUR HOST WANT ME DEAD?

ADEPT
AND YOU ARE AN EMBARRASSMENT WITH A BLADE
ALLOW ME TO RELIEVE YOU OF IT!
AN ASSASSIN!
THE PHOENIX HEART IS STOLEN, TIGER!
IF BOON IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS
RETURN WHAT YOU HAVE STOLEN!
PUNISH HIM!
I AM PAST FEAR

UH?
AGHK
GUNNH!
WOOF!
AIII!

I DO NOT WISH TO DEFEAT YOU
I ONLY WANT WHAT YOU STOLE
SWINE!
DO NOT BLAME YOURSELF, JUDGE X'AIN

YOU COULD NEVER BEST THE MASTER OF THE RING OF STAFFS
I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU WANT ME DEAD BUT YOUR DEATH WAS OF YOUR OWN MAKING
AND THE PHOENIX HEART CANNOT HELP YOU NOW
WILL RULE ZHUMAR AGAIN THIS VESSEL OR ANOTHER
FAREWELL
WE WILL MEET AGAIN SOON!


COULD THAT REALLY HAVE BEEN JUDGE XAIN?
AND WHO WISHES ME DEAD?
ASK RATHER WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM HOLDING THE PHOENIX HEART?
I SENSE AN IMPERIAL INTEREST IN THIS OBJECT
WHAT?
IT IS THE KEY TO SO MANY MYSTERIES A GATEWAY TO THE WORLD OF THE DEAD
DAMNATION AND SALVATION ALL IN ONE
IT MAY HOLD THE ANSWERS TO SAVE US
OR THE POWER TO KILL US ALL
I HEARD OLD MOTHER SHOUTING
I WAS SLEEPING UNTIL YOU WOKE ME. WHAT CAN I KNOW?

Ooh
THESE ARE THE SACRED OBJECTS THAT OLD MOTHER GUARDS SO JEALOUSLY
SO MUCH TRASH
Ah
LEAVE THIS ROOM!
THOSE THINGS ARE DANGEROUS!
WE HEARD NOISES AND
IT IS NONE OF YOUR CONCERN, HUN JAO! DO NOT EVEN LOOK UPON THOSE ITEMS!
THEY HOLD POWERS FAR BEYOND THE KNOWLEDGE OF AN IMBECILE LIKE YOU!
THEY ARE NOT SAFE HERE
THE EMPEROR KNOWS OF THEM-

"AND HE MUST NEVER POSSESS THEM."
POOR ZHUMAR
THE HORDES
THE DRAGONS
NOW THIS
YOU ARE NOT WORTHY OF MY DAUGHTER!
NO!
SHE SHOULD HAVE MARRIED BETTER!
LEAVE ME!
THAT SPICE MERCHANT FROM CHUNHAI!
GAAH!
IT IS EVER THUS ONE MISFORTUNE LEADS TO ANOTHER
WHY STRUGGLE AGAINST FATE, YET SO?
IS THIS RUSHING ABOUT IN THOSE RIDICULOUS CLOTHES
SOMETHING MUST BE DONE TO PUT THESE SPIRITS AT REST. BUT WHAT MIGHT YOU DO?
YES
"SOMETHING MUST BE DONE ABOUT THESE SPIRITS."
LEAVE ME BE!
AND WHY SHOULD I, SON IN LAW?

YOU HAVE BROUGHT MY DAUGHTER SUCH UNHAPPINESS!
WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME SPIRIT CHILD?

UNPLEASANT HARRIDAN
YOU DO ME A SERVICE
KIND PHANTOM
WHAT?
WHAT DO YOU WANT OF ME?
YOU
YOU ARE A SPIRIT
YOU CANNOT
DEPART THIS PLACE!
THIS CITY BELONGS TO HAK'AN SHAN!

AND I AM HYUN JOON APPOINTED MINISTER OF ZHUMAR BY H.S AUGUST MAJESTY THE EMPEROR ZHENG
FIRE UPON THIS TROUBLESOME RABBLE CAPTAIN!
PREPARE WEAPONS!
LIGHT FUSES!
BOOM
BOOM
HA HA HA HA!
HEE HEE!
YOU SEEK TO FRIGHTEN HAK'AN SHAN? YOU THINK THAT HAK'AN SHAN IS A PHANTOM AND CANNOT HARM YOU?
YOU ARE WRONG!
WRONG!

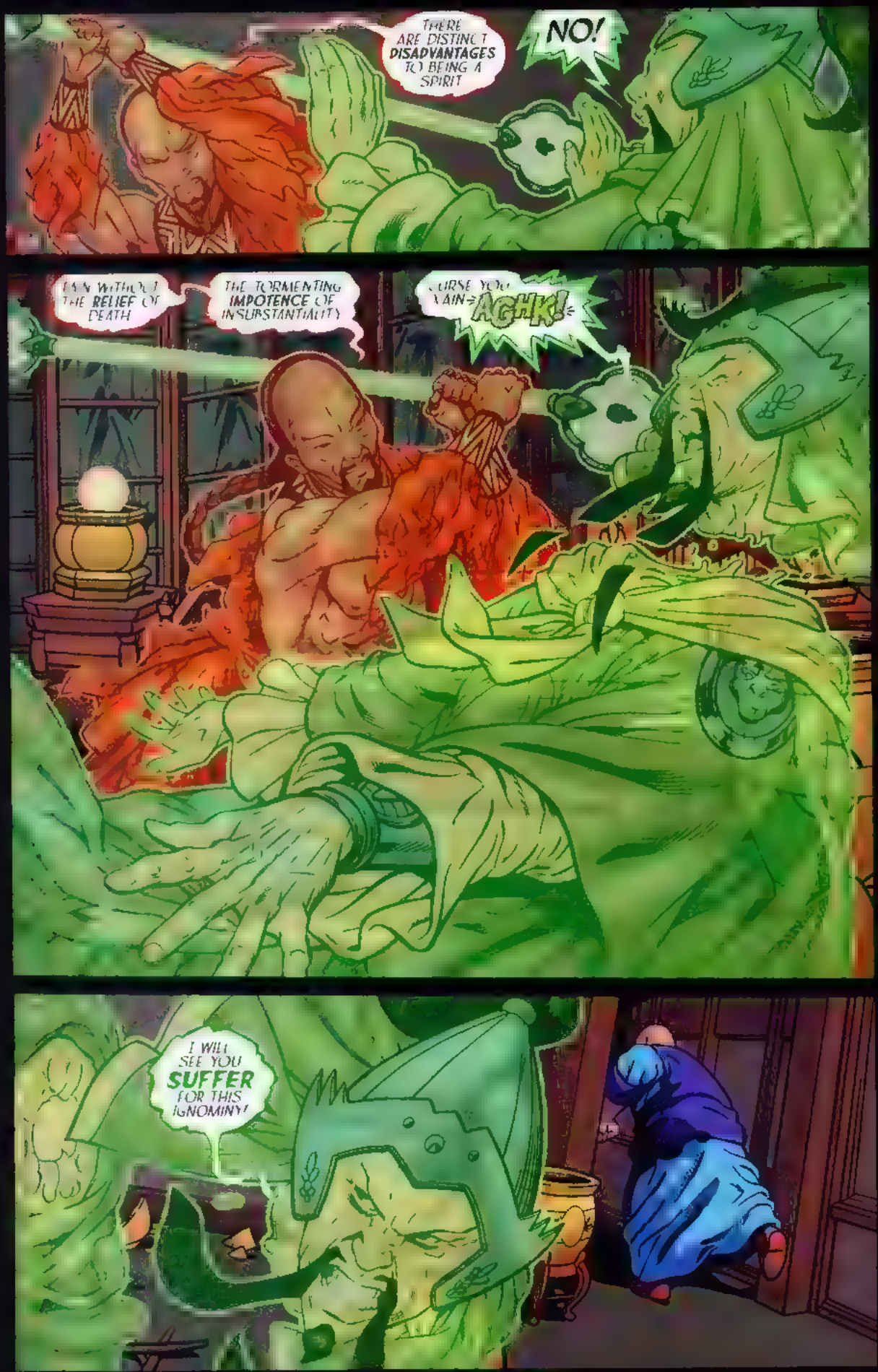
HAK'AN SHAN IS NOT WITHOUT POWER!
SURRENDER THIS THRONE, FLESHLING!
NOT

ARE BOTH
MINE
WHO DEFIES THE SCOURGE OF SHINACEA?
WHO RISKS MY WRATH?
I AM JUDGE XAIN
MY WORD IS LAW HERE FOR THE LIVING AND THE DEAD
ASSASSIN!
KILL
THAT MAN!

WHERE HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME, EVIL SPIRIT?
TO A PLACE WHERE YOU MUST FIGHT OR DIE
HUNH!
SO YOU W... FIGHT

WHOH!
UNGH
HA!!
OOOFF!

UH!
GUNH!
LIVING OR DEAD, YOU WILL GUNHH!
WUHH!
SILENCE, HAKAN SHAN!
YOUR DAY IS OVER
AGAIN


THERE ARE DISTINCT DISADVANTAGES TO BEING A SPIRIT
NO!
I AM WITHOUT THE RELIEF OF DEATH
THE TORMENTING IMPOTENCE OF INSUBSTANTIALITY
CURSE YOU VAIN—
AGHK!
I WILL SEE YOU SUFFER FOR THIS IGNOMINY!

UH!
FEAR NOT MINISTER JOON!
I AM SENT AS AN AGENT OF THE EMPEROR
I AM TO ELIMINATE THE THIEF BOON SAI HONG AND RETRIEVE ARTICLES IMPORTANT TO OUR AUGUST MASTER
YOU ARE NOT MY ASSASSIN
THIS PLEASES ME
I TOO WAS SENT TO MURDER THIS INSOLENT THIEF I WILL AID YOU IN ANY WAY I CAN ON YOUR IMPERIAL MISSION
YOU HAVE MY GRATITUDE, MINISTER JOON

NO
WHAT IS HAPPENING?
HE IS THE SOURCE OF ALL OUR MISERY
ONLY YOUR MISERY ENDS NOW
AND IT IS JUST BEGINNING

Storytellers

WRITER
CHUCK DIXON

PENCILER
JEFF JOHNSON

LETTERER
DAVE LANPHEAR

INKER
TOM RYDER

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WAY OF THE RAT™

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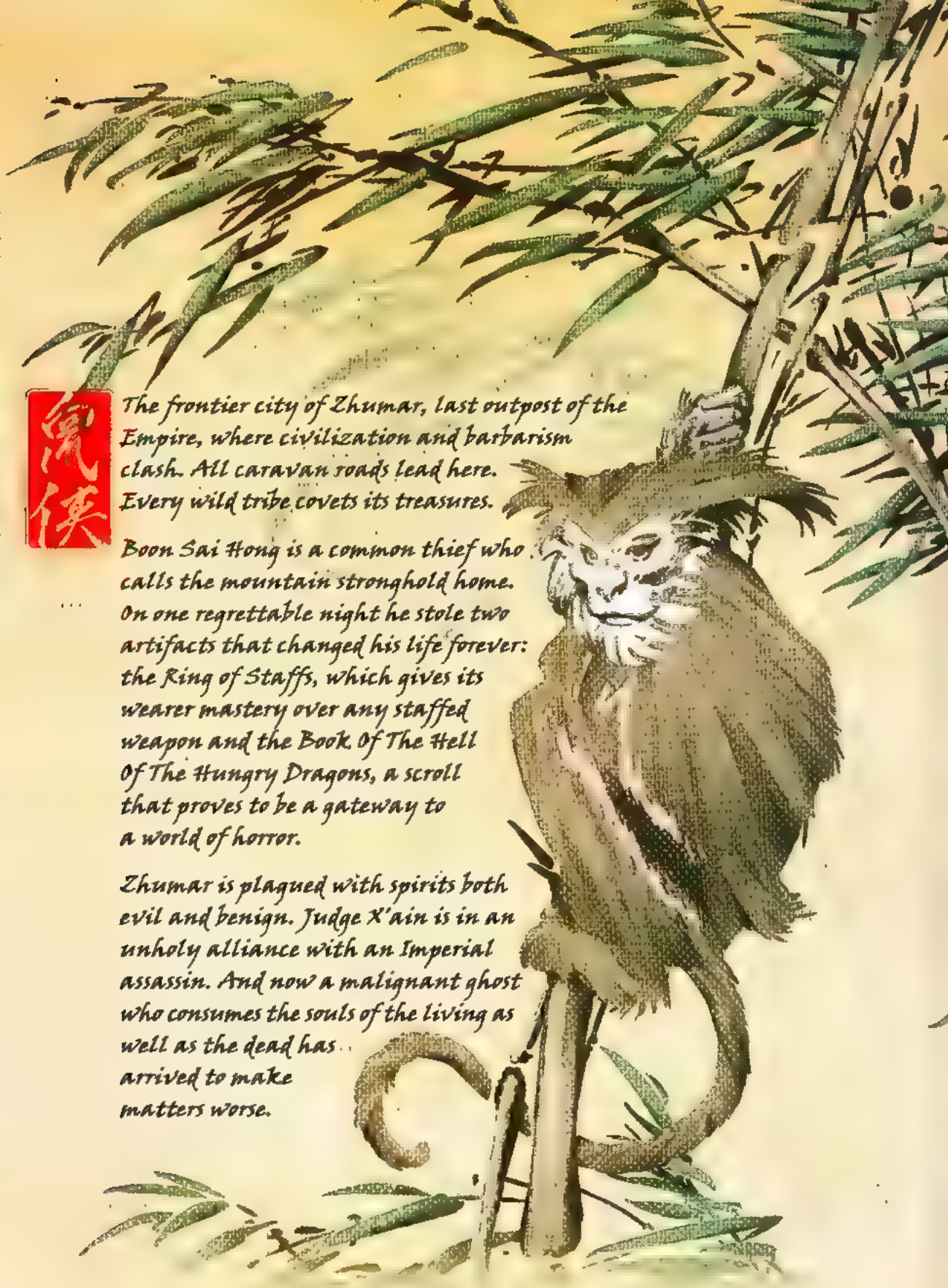
Chuck Dixon Jeff Johnson Tom Ryder Chris Garcia



The frontier city of Zhumar, last outpost of the Empire, where civilization and barbarism clash. All caravan roads lead here. Every wild tribe covets its treasures.

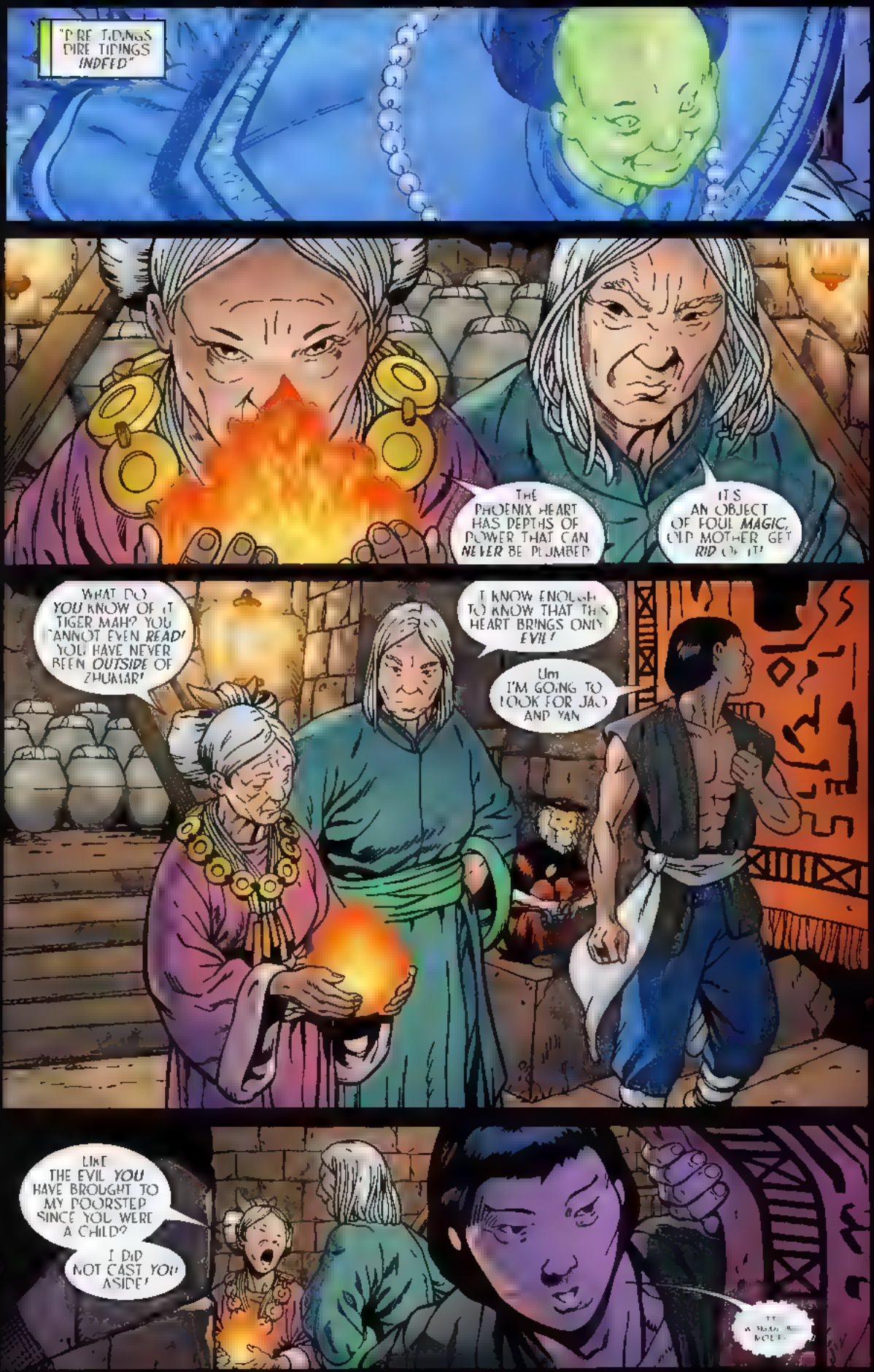
Boon Sai Hong is a common thief who calls the mountain stronghold home. On one regrettable night he stole two artifacts that changed his life forever: the Ring of Staffs, which gives its wearer mastery over any staffed weapon and the Book Of The Hell Of The Hungry Dragons, a scroll that proves to be a gateway to a world of horror.

Zhumar is plagued with spirits both evil and benign. Judge X'ain is in an unholy alliance with an Imperial assassin. And now a malignant ghost who consumes the souls of the living as well as the dead has arrived to make matters worse.

Way of the Rat™ Vol. 1 Issue 17 OCTOBER 2003 FIRST PRINTING. Published by CrossGen Comics, LLC Office of publication: 4023 Tampa Road Suite 2400 Oldsmar Florida 34677 **CrossGen®, CrossGen Comics® CrossGeneration®**, and the **CrossGen sigil®** are registered trademarks of CrossGen Intellectual Property, LLC **Way of the Rat™** and all characters and images are Trademark and Copyright 2003 CrossGen Intellectual Property LLC ALL RIGHTS RESERVED The stories, incidents and characters in this publication are fictional Any similarities to persons living or dead are purely coincidental With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reproduced in any form without the express written consent of CrossGen Comics LLC PRINTED IN CANADA

THE OFT CURSED CITY OF ZHUMAR
THE SPIRITS ARE DISTURBED
THEY FLEE AS THOUGH IN FEAR
YES BU
WHAT DOES A GHOST HAV TO FEAR

A VERY LARGE GHOST
A GIANT GHOST
BUT YET ONLY A GHOST. WHAT HARM...
"Once blessed. Twice cursed. That is the fate of the man who looks to luck for salvation."
Wing Te Sun
MIGHT
UH...


"PIRE TIDINGS DIRE TIDINGS INDEED"
THE PHOENIX HEART HAS DEPTHS OF POWER THAT CAN NEVER BE PLUMBED
IT'S AN OBJECT OF FOUL MAGIC, OLD MOTHER GET RID OF IT!
WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF IT TIGER MAH? YOU CANNOT EVEN READ! YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN OUTSIDE OF ZHUMAR!
I KNOW ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT THIS HEART BRINGS ONLY EVIL!
Um I'M GOING TO LOOK FOR JAO AND YAN
LIKE THE EVIL YOU HAVE BROUGHT TO MY DOORSTEP SINCE YOU WERE A CHILD?
I DID NOT CAST YOU ASIDE!

THAT HORRIBLE SCROLL! THIS WICKED STONE FILLED WITH DEAD SPIRITS!
THIS WICKED STONE IS THE ONLY HOPE FOR DELIVERING PRINCESS ZHENG FROM THE HELL OF DRAGONS
PHAH
WHAT CARE I FOR--
THE DAUGHTER OF THE EMPEROR
PHAH!
YAN?
WHERE ARE THEY?
BOON SAI HONG!
COMING, OLD MOTHER!

GOD OF MY FATHERS!
YOU SUMMONED THESE SPIRITS?
WE DIDN'T CALL THEM IDIOT! THEY CAME THROUGH THE WALLS!
WHAT DO THEY WANT, OLD MOTHER?
HOW WOULD I KNOW?

THEY ARE DRAWN TO THE PHOENIX HEART
BUT I DO NOT KNOW WHY!
WHY NOT ASK ONE OF THEM?
SARA
WHY DO YOU SEEK THE HEART TORMENTED SPIRIT?
IT IS SANCTUARY FROM KUNG KUNG YI!
ALLOW US ENTRY -
PLEEEEASE
THEN ENTER!

WHAT IS KUNG KUNG YI?
IT IS UNKNOWN TO ME
I SAY WE KNOW ALL WE NEED TO KNOW
IT IS SOMETHING THAT INSPIRES TERROR EVEN IN THE DEAD
HM
"IT IS KUNG KUNG Y
DEVOURER OF GHOSTS
ZHUMAR IS NOW A FEEDING GROUND
WHERE DOES IT COME FROM GRANDFATHER?
IT WANDERS THIS WORLD IN SEARCH OF MISPLACED SPIRITS TEI SU
IT IS NO MYSTERY WHY IT WAS DRAWN HERE
BUT ITS POWER IS SO GREAT NOW THAT IT THREATENS THE LIVING

AND YOU SAY THAT A WEAPON TO COMBAT IT IS IN MY FATHER'S LIBRARY?
AN ARTIFACT OF A FORGOTTEN TIME, FORGED WHEN KUNG KUNG YI WAS BUT A WISP
MY FATHER NEVER TOLD ME OF IT
YOU FORGET THAT IT WAS ONCE MY LIBRARY GRANDDAUGHTER
AND FATE HAS BROUGHT YOU AND I TO THIS PLACE ACROSS THE MILES AND YEARS
A WEAPON AND THE POWER TO USE IT
LIFE IN SHAME OR IGNOMINIOUS DEATH
IT IS YOUR CHOICE

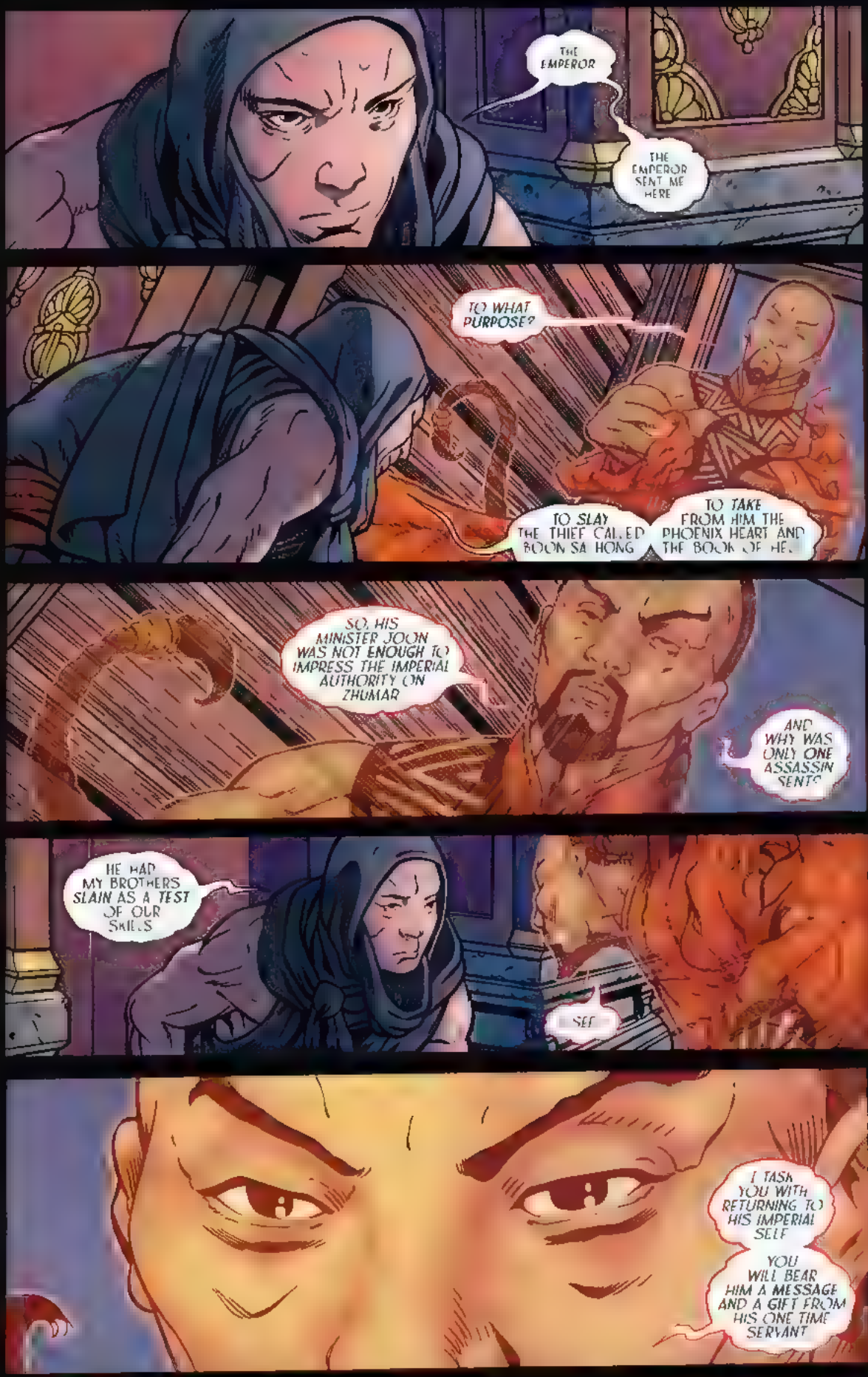
REVEAL TO ME YOUR MISSION AND WHO SENT YOU TO ZHUMAR
OR DIE BY YOUR OWN HAND
WAS IT THE EMPEROR?
Uhh
I WILL NOT TELL
I DO NOT TIRE
YOU ARE STRONG, BUT THE HOURS AND DAYS WILL WEAR YOU DOWN IN THE END

THERE S NO HONOR IN REMAINING SILENT
TO BE SLAIN AS A HOST FOR THE UNLIVING WIL SURELY DAMN YOU
WHAT IS HONOR TO THE DEAD?
A VALID ARGUMENT PERHAPS
ALL OF LIFE S FINER POINTS ARE IRRELEVANT FROM THIS SIDE OF THE GRAVE
IN ANY CASE
IT IS THE REALM OF THE LIVING THAT CONCERNS ME NOW
SO, PLEASE RECONSIDER TELLING ME THAT WHICH I WISH TO KNOW

"OR PREPARE YOURSELF FOR HELL"
I HAVE SO MANY REGRETS
STEALING THE SACRED AND PROFANE OBJECTS
LETTING THE JUDGE HAVE THE BOOK OF HEL
MOST OF ALL, THE DEATH OF PRINCESS ZHENG
THE PRINCESS IS NOT DEAD ONLY DAMNED
SMALL COMFORT PO PO I MIGHT HAVE SAVED HER
DEATH IS IRREVERSIBLE DAMNATION IS NOT
AND YOU HAVE DONE QUITE WELL FOR AN IDIOT
BUT THE PHOENIX HEART HAS PROVEN TO BE YET ANOTHER CURSE

AND WHAT CAUSE HAVE YOU TO CALL ME AN IDIOT?
I DID NOT ASK FOR THIS FATE! MEETING YOU, THAT IS ANOTHER REGRET!
THE NATURE OF FATE IS THAT IT ANSWERS TO NO ONE
IT IS A SISTER TO TIME ITSELF EVER FLOWING FORWARD
"FORWARD TO THE SAME DESTINATION"
MY FATHER NEVER TOLD ME OF THIS HIDING PLACE
HE DID NOT KNOW OF IT
WHAT WOULD IT SERVE TO GIVE HIM A WEAPON?
MY SON WAS A SCHOLAR, NOT A SOLDIER
AND I?

YOU ARE A WARRIOR TEI SU
IT IS CALLED GHOST SLAYER
WEDDED TO THE RING OF BLADES IT IS THE ONLY HOPE FOR ZHUMAR
BATTLE WELL, GRANDDAUGHTER

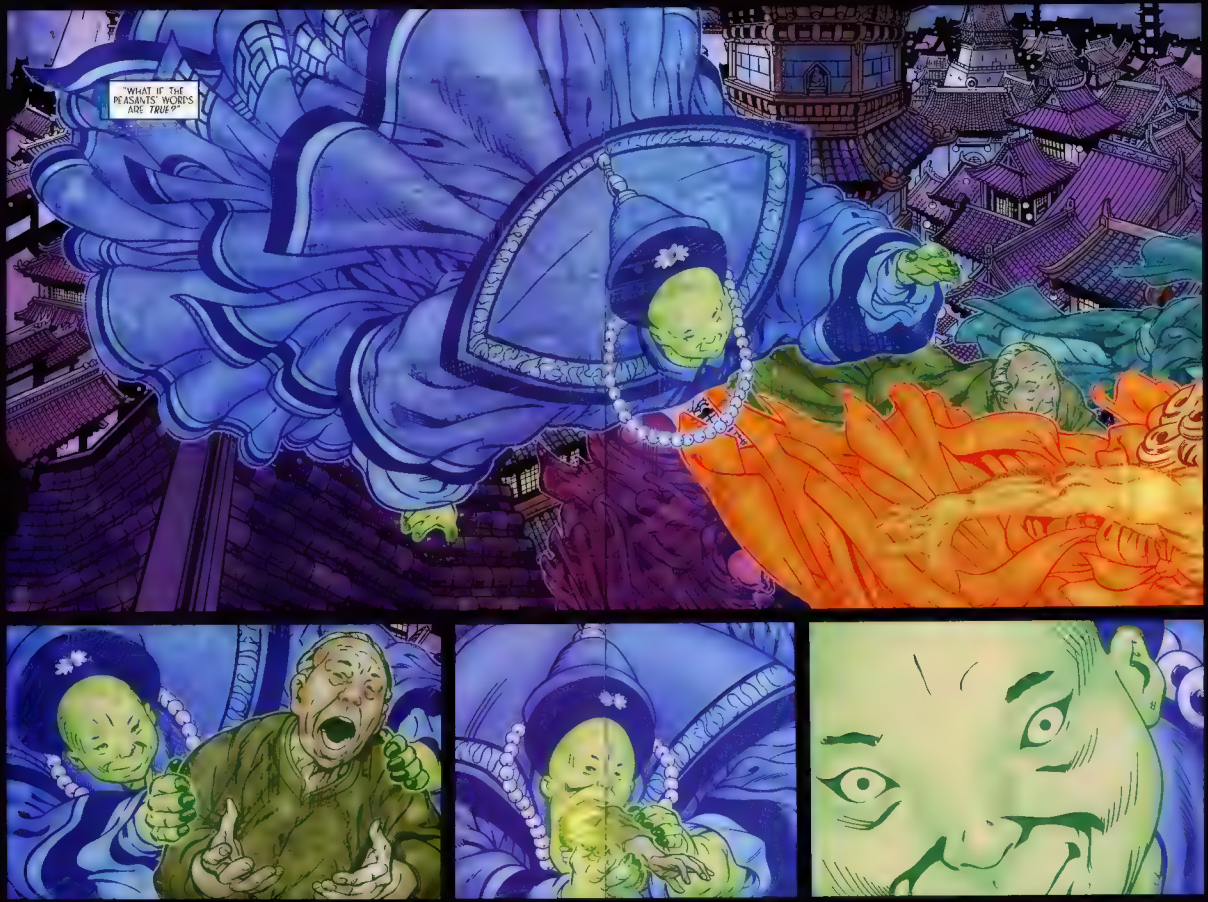

THE EMPEROR
THE EMPEROR SENT ME HERE
TO WHAT PURPOSE?
TO SLAY THE THIEF CALLED BOON SA HONG
TO TAKE FROM HIM THE PHOENIX HEART AND THE BOOK OF HEX
SO, HIS MINISTER JOON WAS NOT ENOUGH TO IMPRESS THE IMPERIAL AUTHORITY ON ZHUMAR
AND WHY WAS ONLY ONE ASSASSIN SENT?
HE HAD MY BROTHERS SLAIN AS A TEST OF OUR SKILLS
SEE
I TASK YOU WITH RETURNING TO HIS IMPERIAL SELF
YOU WILL BEAR HIM A MESSAGE AND A GIFT FROM HIS ONE TIME SERVANT

AND I TRUST HE WILL UNDERSTAND BOTH"
LIKE A FLAME FROZEN IN TIME
TIGER! I NEED YOUR HELP!
AHH! MORE SPIRITS RETURN TO THE HEART!
SOMETHING COMES THIS WAY I CAN FEEL IT IN MY BONES!
THE SAME THING THAT TERRIFIES THESE SPIRITS?
WE MUST KEEP IT FROM THIS HOUSE--FROM THE PHOENIX HEART
HOW WILL COOKING UP THIS STINKING MESS HELP US?
SHUT UP! DO NOT QUESTION ME!
THESE ARE RARE HERBS AND SPICES AND SACRED EARTHS

YOU AND THE BOYS WILL *POUR* THIS ALONG THE WALLS OF THE HOUSE
IT WILL KEEP *FURTHER* SPIRITS FROM US
IT'S *FOUL*
DO AS I SAY!
BOON! JAO! YAN!
I CANNOT *FIND* JAO AND YAN OLD MOTHER
COWARDS WE WILL DO THEIR WORK *FOR* THEM
WE MUST *HURRY*
YOUR *MONKEY* WILL HELP AS WELL
THIS IS *STOMACH* TURNING!

SHUT UP AND *POUR* IT ALONG THE OUTSIDE WALLS OF THE HOUSE
DO NOT MISS A SINGLE *SPOT*
THE *SLIGHTEST* GAP IN THE RING WILL ALLOW UNWANTED SPIRITS THROUGH
MOVE! IT MUST BE DONE *NOW!*
EVEN THE *MONKEY* SHOWS MORE INTELLIGENCE THAN *YOU* TWO!
WE HAVE *LITTLE* TIME LEFT!"
PLEASE CAN YOU NOT FIND *MERCY* IN YOUR HEART?
NO ONE LEAVES ZHUMAR
MINISTER JOON HAS SO *COMMANDED*
YOU DO NOT *UNDERSTAND*

A HORROR ROAMS THE STREETS!
IT IS A GHOST THAT STEALS SOULS!
NO ONE IS SAFE!
TURN FROM THIS GATE OR WE MUST DO OUR DUTY
ALL IS LOST, THEN
ALL IS LOST
I HAVE HEARD EVERY STORY NOW
A HORROR THAT STEALS SOULS
BUT THIS IS HUMAR
WHERE DRAGONS BURST FORTH FROM THE EARTH
AND THE DEAD LIVE AGAIN


"WHAT IF THE PEASANTS' WORDS ARE TRUE?"

WE ARE DONE OLD MOTHER! THE HOUSE IS SAFE!
WE MUST PRAY NOW THAT IT IS ENOUGH
I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT WE STAND AGAINST
THIS FORCE SEEKS THE PHOENIX HEART
WHAT IF WE CANNOT STOP IT, OLD MOTHER?
THEN THE PHOENIX HEART MUST BE DESTROYED

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Chuck Dixon

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Letterer
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Inker
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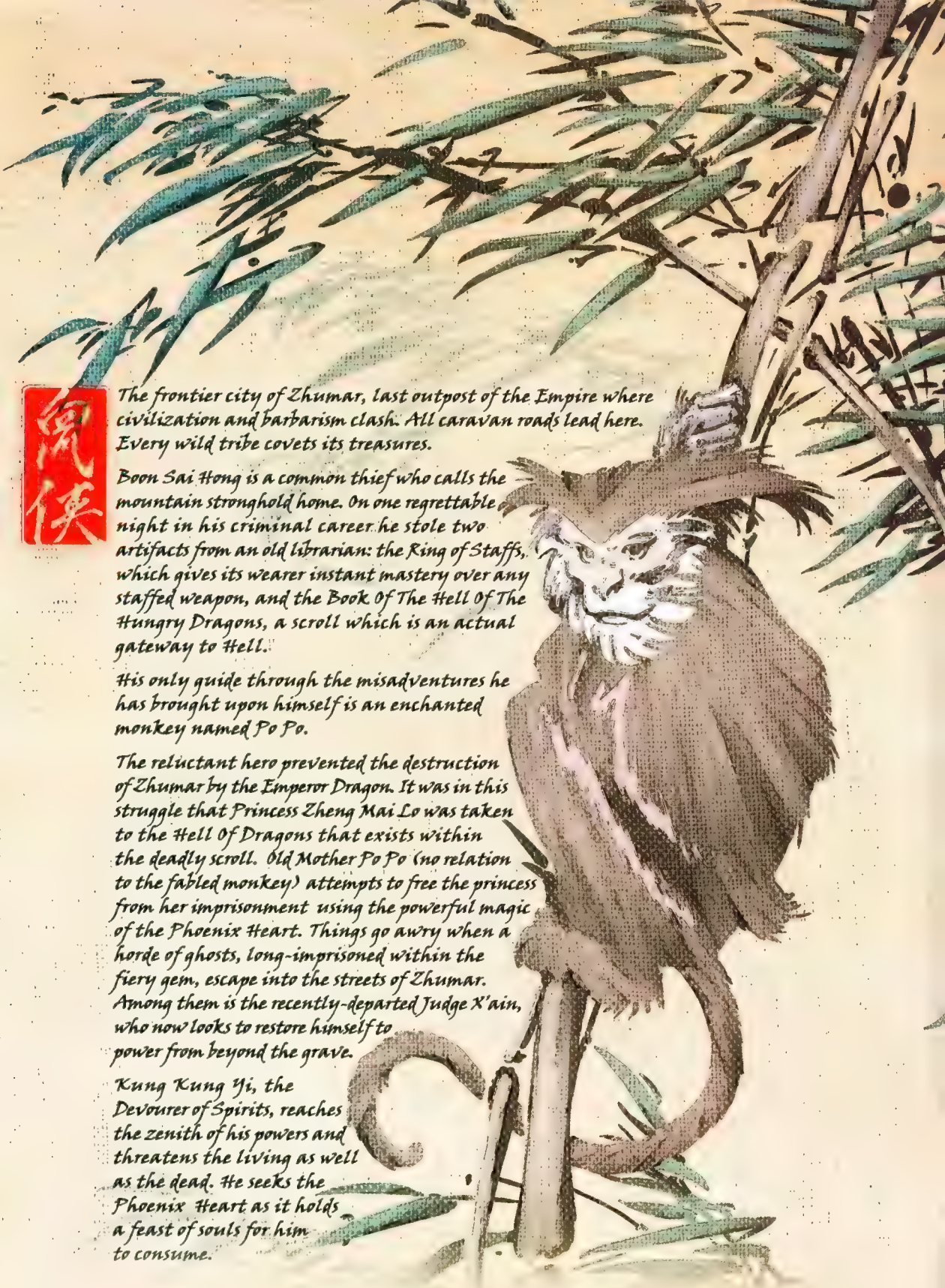

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Kung Kung Yi, the Devourer of Spirits, reaches the zenith of his powers and threatens the living as well as the dead. He seeks the Phoenix Heart as it holds a feast of souls for him to consume.

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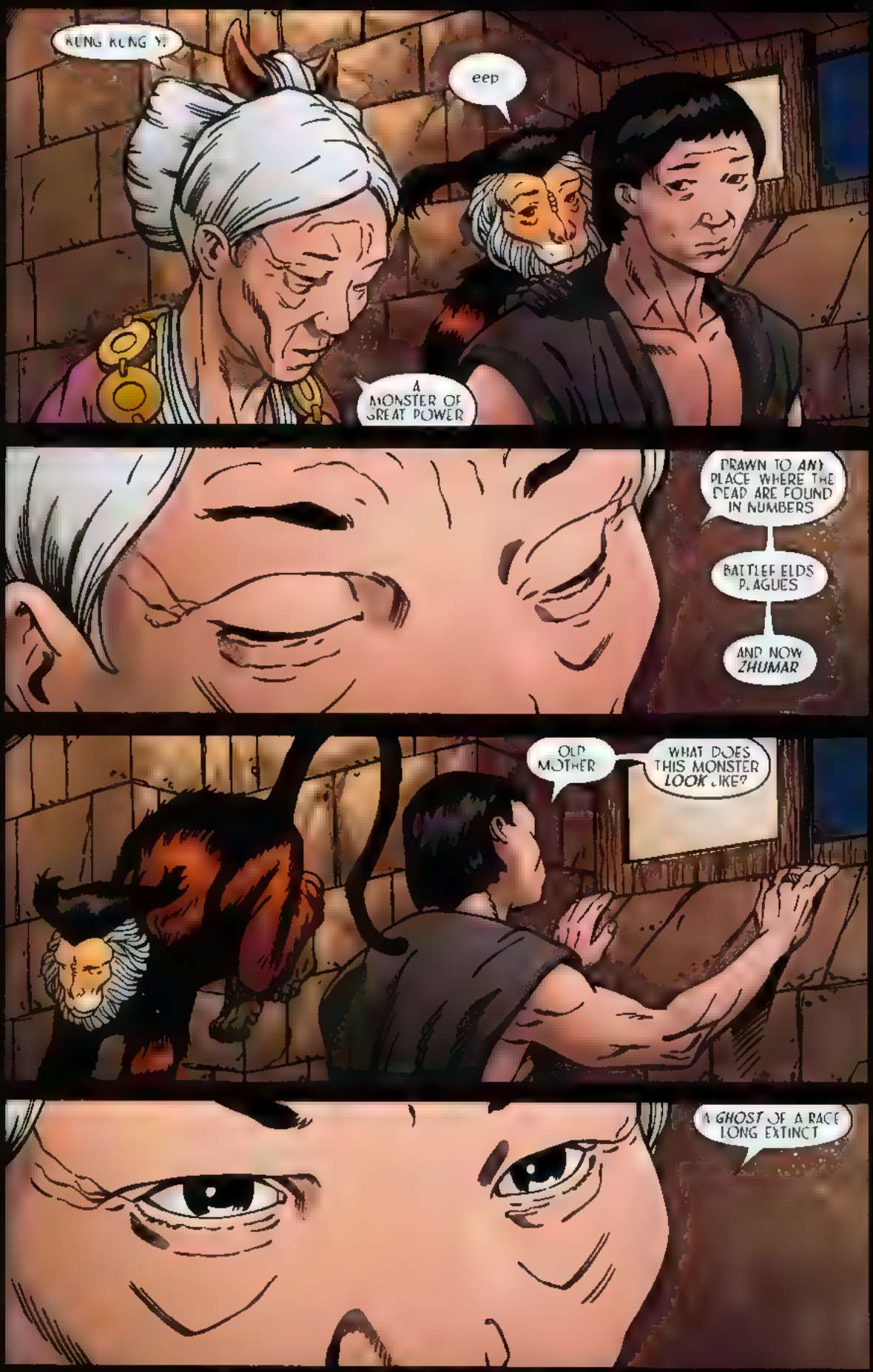
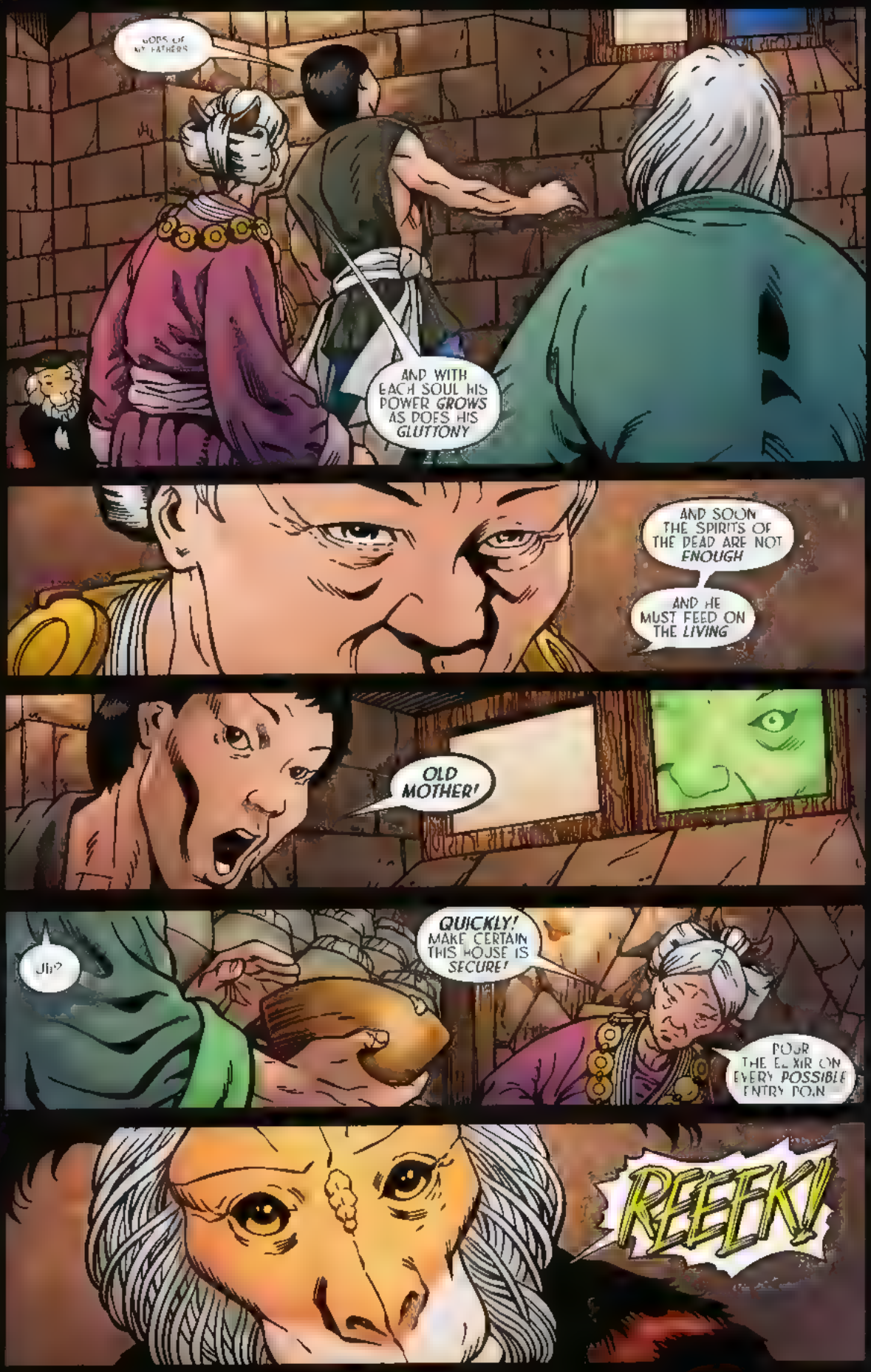
RARF! RARF! RARF!
THAN'S DOG BARKS
IT ALWAYS BARKS BOON
IT BARKS AT SOMETHING OLD MOTHER
FEAR NOT NO SPIRIT, GOOD OR EVIL, MAY ENTER THIS HOUSE

"THE PHOENIX HEART IS SAFE FROM THE DEAD."
"THE HORROR THAT COMES THIS WAY WILL PASS US BY."
"For many, death is not the end of suffering."
Wing Tei Sun
"WHATEVER DRIVES THESE GHOSTS TO THE HEART IS BARRED FROM THIS PLACE."
"I HAVE MADE CERTAIN OF THAT."
ARE YOU SO SURE, OLD MOTHER?
WHAT IF THE FORCE THAT TERRIFIES THE DEAD HAS SWAY OVER THE...LIVING?

PERHAPS BOON IS RIGHT
BOON KNOWS NOTHING HIS HEAD IS LIKE A GOURD
STILL, IT DOES NOT PAY TO BE ILL PREPARED
PLEASE ALLOW US ENTRY-
WHAT WOULD FRIGHTEN THEM THIS WAY?
IT'S BEST TO KNOW WHAT WE FACE
MORE MAGIC MORE TROUBLE
I DIMLY RECALL STORIES OF A BEING THAT PREYS ON THE UNLIVING
A CREATURE OF UNKNOWN CREATION HM HM


KUNG KUNG YI
eep
A MONSTER OF GREAT POWER
DRAWN TO ANY PLACE WHERE THE DEAD ARE FOUND IN NUMBERS
BATTLEFIELDS
PLAGUES
AND NOW ZHUMAR
OLD MOTHER
WHAT DOES THIS MONSTER LOOK LIKE?
A GHOST OF A RACE LONG EXTINCT

"HE *LIVES* ON THE STUFF OF SPIRITS
"HIS HUNGER IS *BOTTOMLESS*
AND THE DEAD ARE FED *INTO* HIM LIKE WOOD UPON A *FIRE*
"THE PHOENIX HEART IS AN ENDLESS *BOUNTY* FOR KUNG KUNG Y"


GODS OF MY FATHERS
AND WITH EACH SOUL HIS POWER GROWS AS DOES HIS GLUTTONY
AND SOON THE SPIRITS OF THE DEAD ARE NOT ENOUGH
AND HE MUST FEED ON THE LIVING
OLD MOTHER!
JU?
QUICKLY! MAKE CERTAIN THIS HOUSE IS SECURE!
POUR THE ELIXIR ON EVERY POSSIBLE ENTRY POINT
REEEK!

ASIDE PO POV
HA!
ENTRANCE DENIED, DEMON!
LOOK EVERYWHERE!
MISS NOT A CRACK OR RATHOLE!
MY BOWL RUNS DRY, OLD MOTHER!
THERE ARE TOO MANY!
I HAVE NO MORE ELIXIR!
Huh?
IT FLEES

"WHAT MIGHT HAVE DRAWN T AWAY?"
KUNG KUNG Y.
I COME TO SLAY YOU UNCLEAN SPIRIT
I BRING THE GHOSTSLAYER TO FREE THE PHANTOMS HELD IN YOUR THRALL
I SEE YOU KNOW THIS BLADE FOUL ONE
THEN YOU KNOW IT WILL SEND YOU TO ETERNITY

SHE BATTLES THAT MONSTER ALONE?
THE SILKEN GHOST WIELDS A MYSTICAL WEAPON
SHE'LL NEED MY HELP!
THE RING OF BLADES WILL PROTECT HER BOON
YOU MUST NOT GO TO HER

DO YOU FEEL PAIN KUNG KUNG Y..?
HAS IT BEEN EONS SINCE YOU LAST FELT AGONY?
I CANNOT BE!

NN.
NO!
I WILL NOT LET THIS HAPPEN!
BOON! YOU HAVE LEFT THE CONTAINMENT BARRIER! YOU ARE NOT SAFE!
OLD MOTHER IS RIGHT THIS IS A STUPID THING TO DO!
THEN WHY ARE YOU ALONG PO PO?
YOUR LEVEL OF MORONIC BEHAVIOR DEMANDS A WITNESS

THE SWORD...
SHE WOULD NOT GO TO BATTLE WITHOUT A PROPER WEAPON
AWAY FROM HER
AWAY FROM
I THINK HE LIKES MY GRANDDAUGHTER LITTLE MONKEY
YOU AGAIN
WERE YOU THIS ANNOYING WHEN YOU WERE ALIVE?

YOU CANNOT HAVE HER!
I WON'T LET YOU!
GET AWAY FROM THE BEAST IDIOT! YOU ARE NOT A SWORD MASTER!
TEI SU! AWAKEN! AWAKEN!
#1

DESTROY THE PHOENIX HEART BEFORE THIS MONSTER COMES FOR IT!
NO, TIGER MAH!
I WILL NOT LOSE SO PRECIOUS AN OBJECT UNTIL I AM SURE ALL HOPE IS LOST!
BOON MAY YET WIN!
OUR FATES REST ON THE SHOULDERS OF THE JADE RAT
"GODS HAVE PITY UPON US
MERCY

UNNH!
HIS REACH IS TOO GREAT!
THE MONKEY IS RIGHT
SINCE SURRENDERING THE RING OF BLADES
I AM NO SWORDSMAN

THIS WAY HIDEOUS CREATURE
BOON SAI HONG AWAITS

KA!!
NO
KUNG KUNG Y
S NO MORE!

YOU ARE DEAD! HOW WILL YOU PROVIDE FOR MY DAUGHTER NOW?
NO- NOOOOO--
GAAAH!
ORDER IS RESTORED
THE DEAD ARE AT REST ONCE MORE
NOW WE MAY RETURN TO THE AFFAIRS OF THE LIVING

"THE FORWARD MOTION OF LIFE"
TEI SU
TEI SU PLEASE SPEAK TO ME
I DID NOT KNOW YOUR SECRET THE SICKEN GHOST
BUT I KNEW YOU WOULD BE ALL RIGHT YOU ARE STRONG
BOOM!
THE BOY IS FEARLESS A FINE GRANDSON HE WOULD MAKE
THE BOY IS WITLESS, YOU MEAN WHY DON'T YOU FOLLOW THE OTHER PHANTOMS?
I THINK I WILL REMAIN A WHILE TO WATCH OVER TEI SU
I THINK I WILL FIND SOME RICE WINE AND TRY TO FORGET FOOLS AND GHOSTS OF FOOLS

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Zhumar is free of Kung Kung Yi, the Devourer of Spirits. But there's still plenty of ghosts wandering the streets. Many of them are up to no good.

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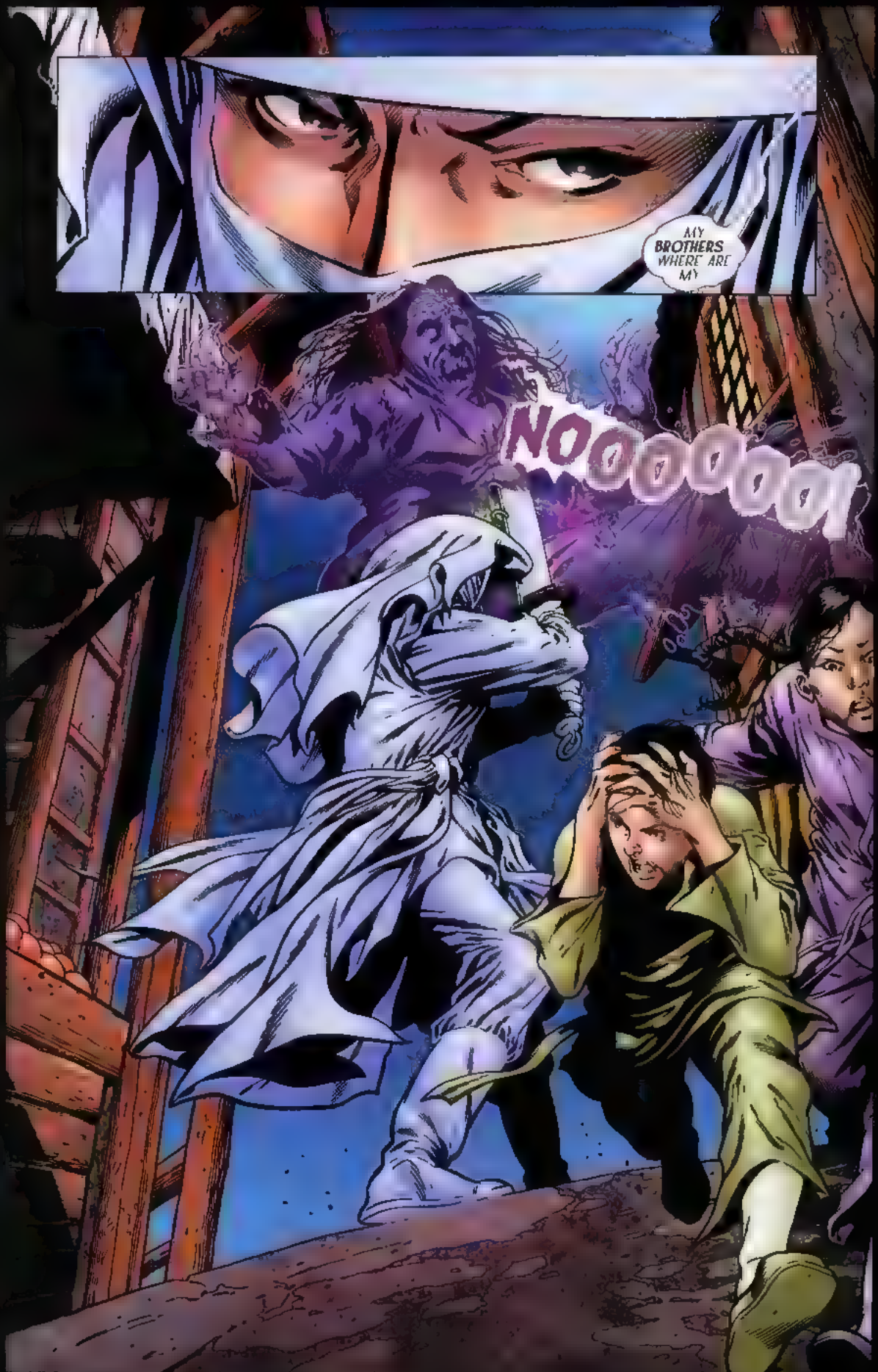
LITTLE ONES
SO LATE TO BE ABROAD THE STREETS
SO LATE
"Evil does not die with the flesh."
Wing Tei Sun

SO YOUNG
SO STRONG
YET ST..
LIVING
WE CANNOT
REACH BEYOND
THE VEIL OF
DEATH
WE BRING THEM
TO US, FRIEND
EVERYTHING
DIES
ONE'S SO SMALL
MIGHT EASILY DIE OF
TERROR
YESSSSSSS
UH?
WHAT IS
THIS?

I AM THE SILKEN GHOST
I AM CHARGED TO PROTECT ZHUMAR FROM POISONOUS SPIRITS WITH THIS GHOSTKILLING BLADE
A BLADE THAT SLAYS THE ALREADY-SLAIN? DON'T MAKE ME...

HOO?
KNOW THAT FOR EVIL PHANTOMS SUCH AS YOU
EVEN ETERNITY HAS AN END
COME WITH ME, CHILDREN
WE LOST OUR PUPPY AND CAME OUTSIDE TO--
YOU ARE SAFE NOW
NO
WE'RE
NOT


MY BROTHERS WHERE ARE MY
NOOOOOOO!

MIST
ONLY MIST
YOU DO WELL GRANDDAUGHTER
THERE ARE SO MANY YET TO DISPOSE OF ZHUMAR IS AWASH IN GHOSTS
AND WHERE DOES THEIR ESSENCE GO WHEN DISPOSED OF BY GHOSTKILLER?
ARE WE NOT TAUGHT THAT THE SOUL IS IMMORTAL?
SOME MORE IMMORTAL THAN OTHERS, I SUPPOSE
BUT DO NOT PONDER WHAT IS BEYOND YOUR ABILITY TO KNOW

"INSTEAD CONCENTRATE ON THE EVIL REMAINING WITHIN THE CITY"
A POOR JOKE THEN?
WE ARE SWORN TO UPHOLD ORDER IN ZHUMAR
WE SERVE ONLY MINISTER JOON
WHAT MAKES YOU THINK WE WOULD TAKE ORDERS
FROM A WRAITH?
I AM THE MASTER OF ZHUMAR
JUDGE XAIN ADMINISTERS THIS CITY NO MATTER WHAT SIDE OF THE GRAVE HE IS ON
YOU WILL DO AS I BID

AND WHAT WI YOU DO SHOULD WE DEFY YOU JUDGE?
WHAT MIGHT A WISP OF SMOKE DO, EH?
THIS MAN BY YOUR SIDE - DO YOU TRUST HIM?
WITH MY LIFE WE WERE CHILDREN N THE SAME VILLAGE
COMRADES IN ARMS
LOYAL UNTO DEATH
A WRAITH, AM I?

DO YOU NOW SEE THE FUTILITY OF YOUR DEFIANCE?
MY VENGEANCE IS REAL MY WORD HAS FLESH
NO ONE IS FREE FROM MY LAW
I COULD BE ANYONE YOUR BEST FRIEND YOUR MOST TRUSTED CONSPIRATOR EVEN YOURSELF
AND YOU COULD NEVER KNOW, COULD YOU?
SO, I HAVE YOUR UNQUESTIONING OBEDIENCE
NOW BEGONE FROM MY SIGHT!
I WILL HAVE FURTHER ORDERS SOON CONCERNING YOUR DUTIES!

ZHUMAR IS MINE ONCE MORE
AND NO MAN MAY TAKE IT FROM ME
" NO MATTER HIS STATION IN LIFE "
THE IMPERIAL PALACE OF HIS AUGUST IMPERIAL PERSONAGE

YOU HAVE *RETURNED*, ASSASSIN
HAVE YOU *SUCCEEDED* IN YOUR MISSION?
I SENSE *NOT* I DO NOT *FEEL* THE PHOENIX HEART OR THE SCROLL OF DRAGONS ON YOUR PERSON
IT IS NOT *WISE* TO FAIL THE EMPEROR AND RETURN TO *FACE* HIM WITH FAILURE
BUT YOU HAVE BROUGHT ME *SOME* TOKEN?

A GIFT FROM JUDGE X'AIN?
I IS HYUN JOON WERE YOU NOT TASKED WITH THE RULE OF ZHUMAR?
I HAVE FAILED YOU YOUR MERCIFUL AND HONORABLE SELF!
I WAS SLAIN! BETRAYED!
I HAVE PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE FOR MY LOYALTY TO YOU!
IS THERE NO HOPE FOR ME?
HYUN FOLLOW ME
ASSASSIN YOU ARE DISMISSED FOR NOW

YOUR LIBRARY?
LONG HAVE I HEARD OF ITS RARITIES, YOUR IMPERIAL PERFECTION
A COLLECTION UNEQUALLED IN THE KINGDOM
THE WORLD, MY GHOSTLY SERVANT
THERE ARE MANUSCRIPTS AND SCROLLS IN EVERY LANGUAGE - EVEN FORGOTTEN ONES
ONE MIGHT SPEND AN AGE AND NOT READ ALL OF THESE
TWO AGES NOW WHICH SCROLL IS THE ONE I SEEK?
NO, THIS IS NOT IT NOR THIS
I REALLY MUST SPEND MORE TIME SORTING THESE BY SUBJECT
AH
YOU HAVE FOUND WHAT YOU SEEK, GLORIOUS MASTER?

THE BOOK OF THE HELL OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS
A FITTING FATE FOR A MAN OF YOUR *TASTES*, HYUN JOON
TO BE *CONSUMED* UNTIL THE END OF TIME BY RAVENOUS SPIRITS
NO

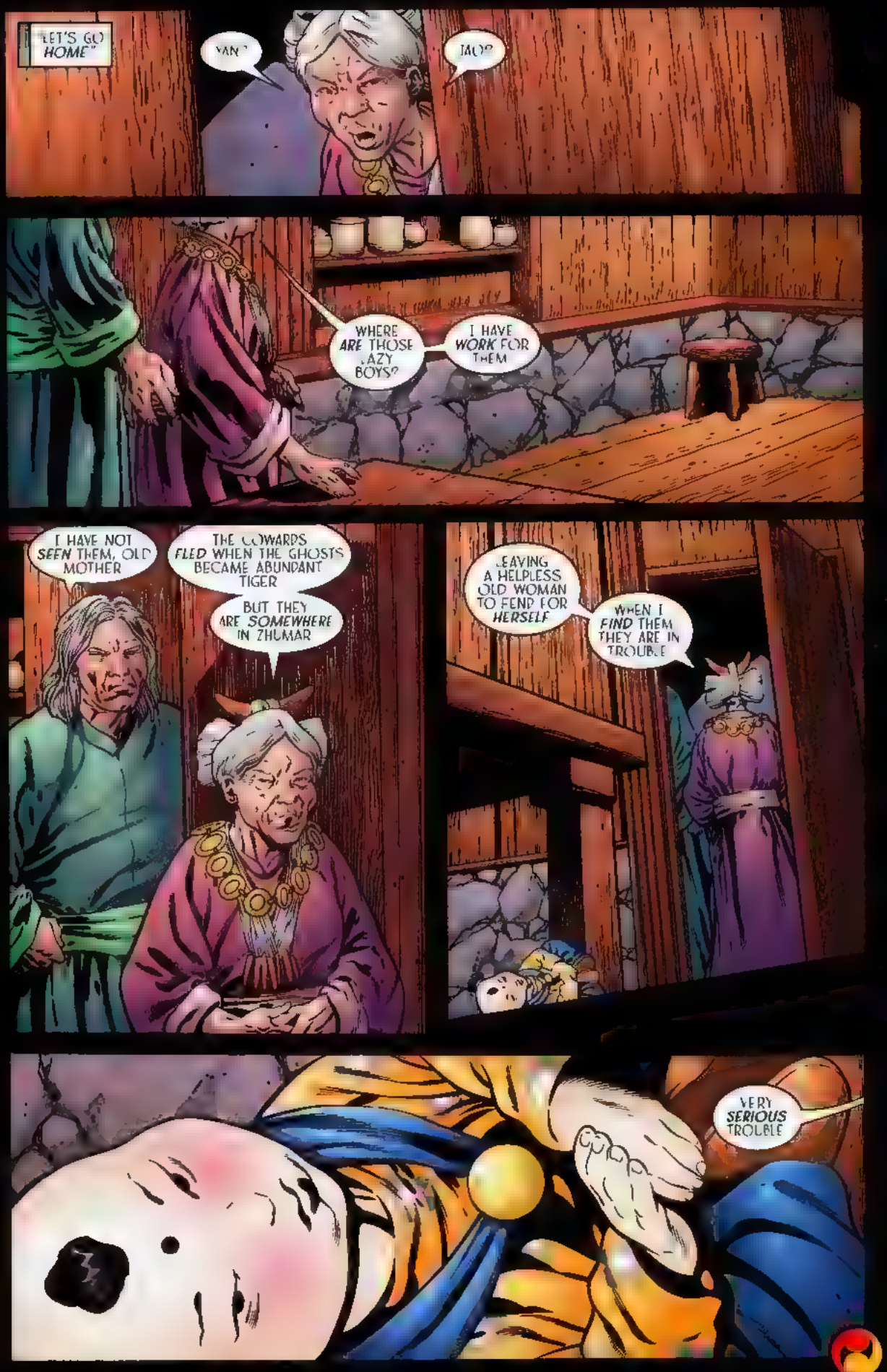
WHY MUST I SUFFER THIS FATE, MASTER?
YOU FAILED ME HYUN
EVEN DEATH CANNOT SPARE YOU FROM THAT GNOMINY
YOU SEE
YOU WERE WRONG WHEN YOU SAID YOU HAD PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE
BUT IT IS TRUE THAT MY COLLECTION IS AN IMPRESSIVE ONE

" THOUGH NOT ENTIRELY COMPLETE
YOU RETIRE, TEI SU?
THE LIVING MUST REST GRANDFATHER
SLEEP I FORGOT ABOUT SLEEP
NOT EVEN THE PLEASURE OF SLUMBER
DEATH SOUNDS LIKE MISERY
TEI SU
WHO...?

BOON SA' HONG?
I CAME BY *NIGHT* TO KEEP THE SECRET OF THE S.I.KEN GHOST SAFE
WHY ARE YOU *HERE?* HAVE YOU COME TO *STEAL* ONCE MORE?
I *STILL* REGRET MY THEFTS FROM THIS PLACE
THEN WHY *VISIT* MY FATHER'S HOUSE?
TO SEE *YOU*
I WAS *CONCERNED* FOR YOU
THAT DEVOURING GHOST NEARLY CAPTURED YOUR *SOUL* AND--
I AM *WELL,* BOON
MY SPIRIT IS *STRONG*
IT IS *KIND* OF YOU TO LOOK AFTER ME, BOON
TEI SU I

ENOUGH!
YOU WERE NOT INVITED HERE, THIEF! MY GRANDDAUGHTER IS AN HONORABLE WOMAN!
IS THIS THE AGE YOU LIVE IN? AN UNESCORTED MAN SNEAKS INTO THE HOUSE OF AN UNMARRIED GIRL?
IT IS NOT ACCEPTABLE!
YOU THINK YOU ARE A LIKELY SUITOR FOR MY GRANDDAUGHTER? A WASTREL? A CRIMINAL?
THIS WAS MY HOUSE WHILE I LIVED! I WOULD HAVE HAD YOU BEATEN!
THIS IS THE COMPANY YOU KEEP? YOU WELCOME SCOUNDRELS AND MISCREANTS UNDER MY ROOF?
HE LOOKS LIKE ONE TO ME!
IT IS A BLESSING THAT I WAS RETURNED TO WATCH OVER YOU!
YES, GRANDFATHER

AND YOU--
HUH
JUST LIKE A THIEF GONE IN THE DARK
YOU WILL NOT DISHONOR THIS HOUSE TEI SU! THAT MAN IS NOT A HUSBAND FOR YOU!
GRANDFATHER PLEASE!
I HEARD SHOUTING
HER GRANDFATHER WAS HOME HE CALLED ME A WASTREL
I MET HER GRANDFATHER
HE IMPRESSED ME AS A MAN OF WISDOM
ENOUGH OF YOUR BITTER TONGUE PO PO


"LET'S GO HOME"
YAN?
JAO?
WHERE ARE THOSE LAZY BOYS?
I HAVE WORK FOR THEM
I HAVE NOT SEEN THEM, OLD MOTHER
THE COWARDS FLED WHEN THE GHOSTS BECAME ABUNDANT TIGER
BUT THEY ARE SOMEWHERE IN ZHUMAR
LEAVING A HELPLESS OLD WOMAN TO FEND FOR HERSELF
WHEN I FIND THEM THEY ARE IN TROUBLE
VERY SERIOUS TROUBLE

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MIKE PERKINS

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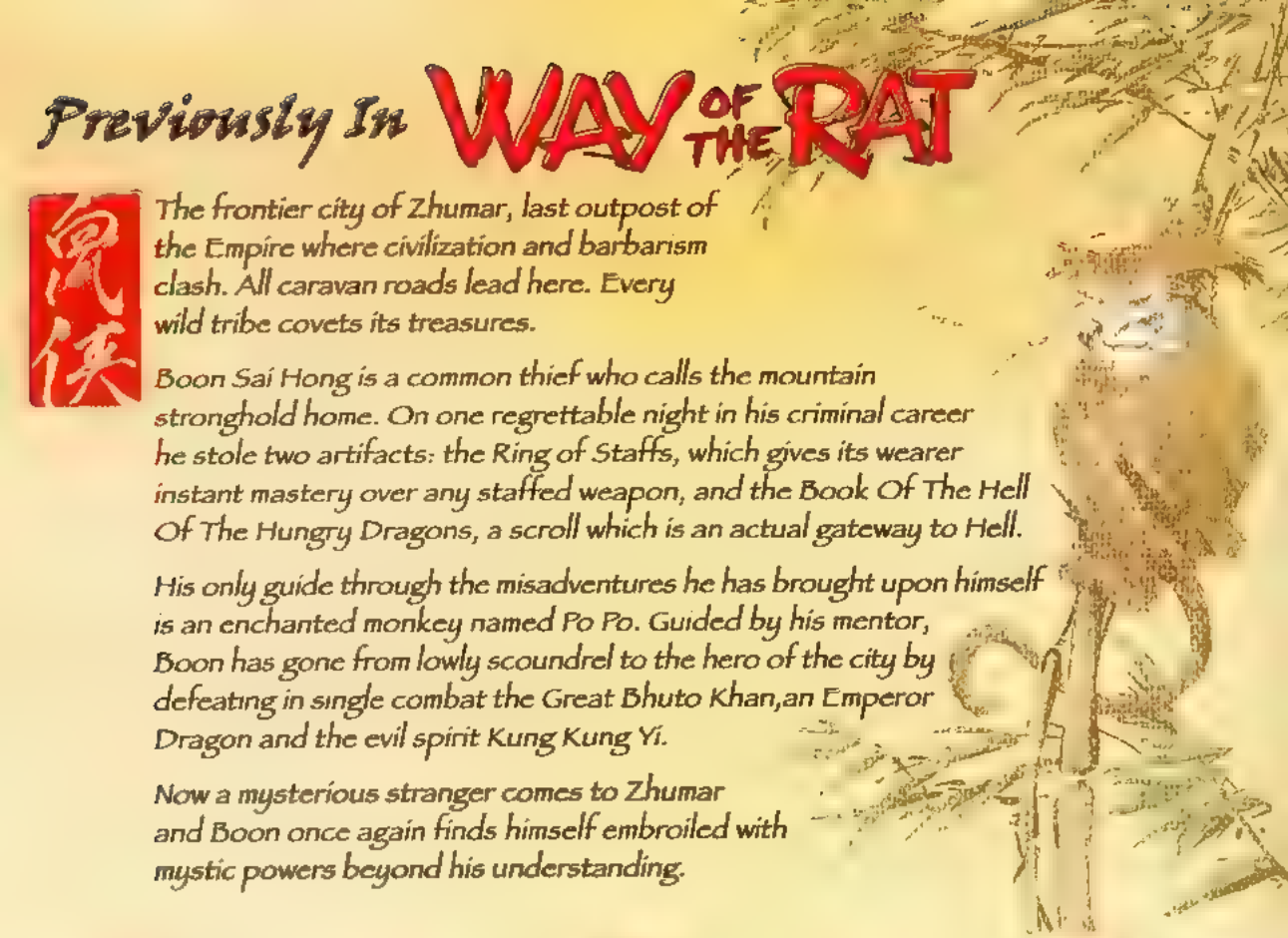

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His only guide through the misadventures he has brought upon himself is an enchanted monkey named Po Po. Guided by his mentor, Boon has gone from lowly scoundrel to the hero of the city by defeating in single combat the Great Bhuto Khan,an Emperor Dragon and the evil spirit Kung Kung Yi.

Now a mysterious stranger comes to Zhumar and Boon once again finds himself embroiled with mystic powers beyond his understanding.

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PENCILLER: LUKE ROSS

INKER: TOM RYDER

COLORIST: CHRIS GARCIA

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Cover By Jeff Johnson, Tom Ryder & Chris Garcia

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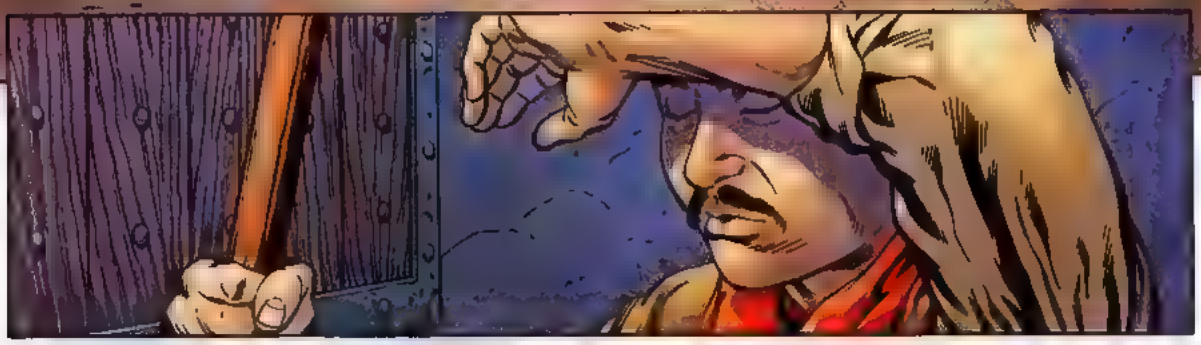


JH?

HOLD, STRANGER WHAT BUSINESS HAVE YOU IN ZHUMAR?
ENTRANCE TO THE CITY IS RESTRICTED TO THOSE WITH PROPER AUTHORITY
I AM MY OWN AUTHORITY
MY BUSINESS IS ALSO MY OWN
THEN RETURN THE WAY YOU CAME STRANGER!
NO ONE ENTERS ZHUMAR WITHOUT PERMISSION
THEN THAT IS HOW IT MUST BE

DO I HAVE PERMISSION TO ENTER YOUR CITY?
YOU YES DO AS YOU WISH
WHO ARE YOU?

I AM POON FEI LHONG
I SEEK THE MAN WHO STOLE MY NAME

I SEEK GUIDANCE TO HIS HOME
GAAAH!
WAKE UP, YOU STINKING BEAST!
FOUL MONKEY! GET OUT OF MY LARDER!
EH?
EEK!
THIEVING HAIRBALL!
BOON?
IN HERE, PO PO
YOUR GRANDMOTHER IS MOST UNPLEASANT
YOU PROFESS TO BE WISE

-AND YOU ARE ONLY NOW LEARNING THIS?
THIS IS NOT YOUR ROOM
JAO AND YAN HAVE RUN AWAY
I AM LOOKING FOR SOMETHING TO TELL ME WHERE THEY MAY HAVE GONE
THEY MAY BE ANYWHERE COWARDS SUCH AS THEY CAN BE MOST CLEVER AT CONCEALMENT
I HAVE FOUND SOME THING
A LITTLE DOLL
IT LOOKS TO BE OF SMALL VALUE
WHY WOULD YAN HAVE SOMETHING LIKE THIS?
I WISH KNEW WHERE THEY WERE
NO!!

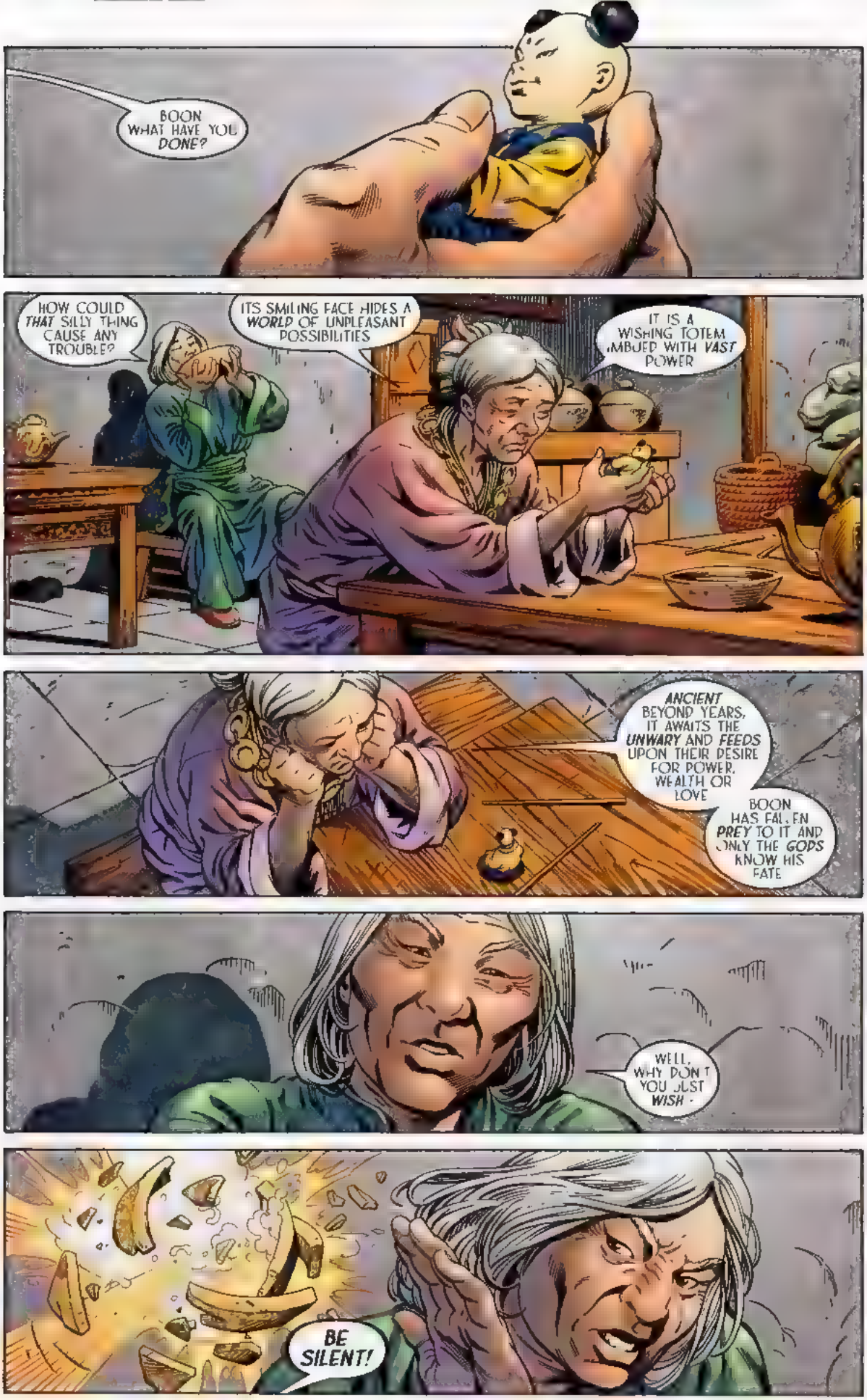
WHERE ARE WE?
STUPID
STUPID
IDIOT!

THAT WAS A WISHING DOLL!
YOU TELL IT YOUR FONDEST DESIRE AND IT'S GRANTED!
NO WONDER YAN HAD IT!
THIS LOOKS LIKE ALL THE TREASURE IN THE WORLD!
WHICH IS PROBABLY WHAT ONE OF YOUR WITLESS FRIENDS WISHED FOR
AND THEN THEY WERE BROUGHT HERE NEVER TO RETURN
AS WERE WE WHEN YOU WISHED TO KNOW WHERE THEY ARE
SO? WE SIMPLY WISH TO BE RETURNED TO ZHUMAR
WITH A ROOMFUL OF GOLD
FOR THAT YOU'D NEED THE DOLL
UH?
IT'S NOT HERE
THEN WHERE IS IT?

AIIIII!
THEN WE ARE TRAPPED?
WE DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE WE ARE!
WE COULD BE ANYWHERE UNDER HEAVEN!
AND WE ARE NOT ALONE
WHO? WHO IS HERE?
BOON!
GODS OF OUR FATHERS WE'RE SAVED!
JAO?
YAN?

WE LOST HOPE!
HAVE YOU ANY FOOD WITH YOU?
HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN HERE?
THERE IS NO WAY TO KNOW!
THESE CAVES ARE ENDLESS! ENDLESS!
AND WORSE
WORSE?
THE TREASURE IS GUARDED
BY WHO?
WE KNOW NOT
ONLY THAT WE HAVE BEEN HIDING FROM IT SINCE THAT CURSED DOLL BROUGHT US HERE

DO YOU KNOW A MAN NAMED POON FEI LHONG?
THE *HERO* OF ZHUMAR?
OF *COURSE!* I SOLD HIM A *SWORD!*
A SWORD?
HE USED IT TO *SLAY* THE EMPEROR DRAGON!
A MAP?
POON FEI LHONG USES NO BLADE
THAT SHOWS YOUR *IGNORANCE,* FRIEND WHY
WHERE DOES THIS POON FEI LHONG RESIDE?
HUH?
AT THE END OF THE STREET OF SCOUNDRELS IN THE THIEVES QUARTER
BUT *MIND* YOUR BACK
--IT'S A *DANGEROUS* PLACE!


BOON WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
HOW COULD THAT SILLY THING CAUSE ANY TROUBLE?
ITS SMILING FACE HIDES A WORLD OF UNPLEASANT POSSIBILITIES
IT IS A WISHING TOTEM IMBUED WITH VAST POWER
ANCIENT BEYOND YEARS, IT AWAITS THE UNWARY AND FEEDS UPON THEIR DESIRE FOR POWER, WEALTH OR LOVE
BOON HAS FALLEN PREY TO IT AND ONLY THE GODS KNOW HIS FATE
WELL, WHY DON'T YOU JUST WISH -
BE SILENT!

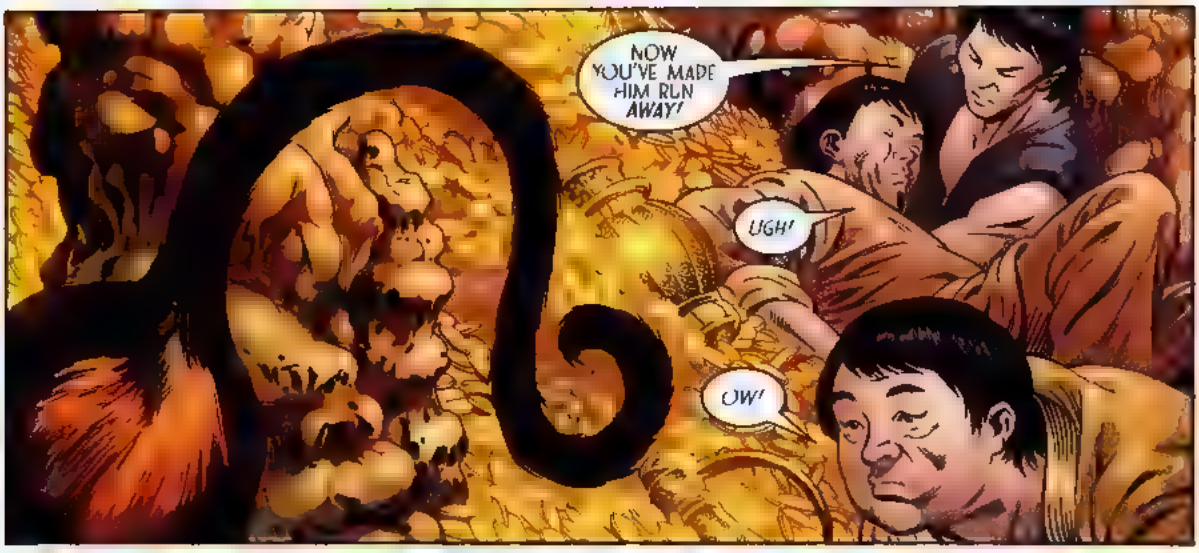
DO NOT MAKE YOUR WISHES KNOWN!
YOU HAVE NO INKLING OF THE FORCES YOU WOULD UNWITTINGLY CALL UPON!
WHY HAVE SUCH A THING?
TO KEEP IT FROM OTHERS.
ONE OF YOUR THIEVING FRIENDS MUST HAVE STOLEN IT FROM MY CABINET OF TALISMANS
SO, IF IT IS SO DANGEROUS, THEN DESTROY IT
I CANNOT
IT MAY NOW HOLD THE ONLY HOPE FOR BOON
BUT FIRST I MUST CONSIDER WHAT WORDS TO USE
EVERY POSSIBILITY FOR CALAMITY MUST BE REMOVED FROM MY REQUEST

"ONE MISSTEP AND MISFORTUNE GREETS US"
NOK NOK
SOMEONE IS HERE
PERHAPS IT IS CONSTABLES COME TO TAKE ME FROM THIS MADNESS
WHO ARE
GUHH!

UNNH!
I AM POON FEI HONG
I SEEK THE MAN WHO STOLE MY NAME
POON
HA HA HA HA HA HA!

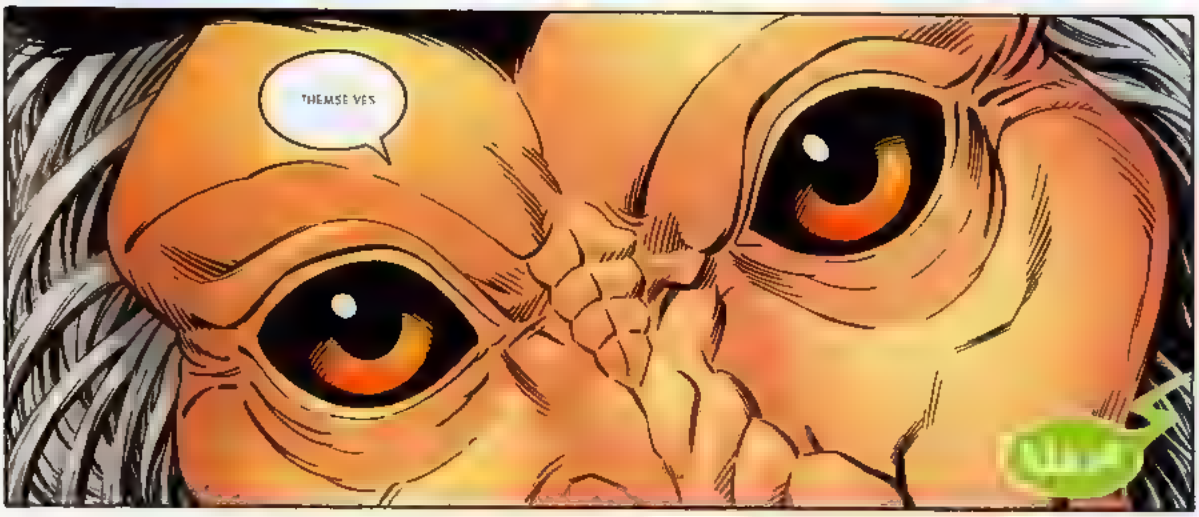
WE MUST NOT PANIC WE MUST USE OUR MINDS
Hunh
THEN WE ARE DOOMED
WE HAVE THOUGHT OF EVERYTHING!
WITHOUT THE POLL WE ARE LOST!
WE WILL WANDER THESE CAVES FOREVER!
OR UNTIL WE STARVE
LOOK AT THESE OTHERS WHO WISHED FOR RICHES AS YAN DID WITHOUT FOOD OR WATER. WE WILL SHARE THEIR FATE!
UNLESS
--WE EAT THE MONKEY
NO NO!
...

NO! WE CANNOT EAT THE MONKEY!
MONKEY LIVERS ARE DELICIOUS!
WE'LL FRY HIM!
I WANT HIS HEART!
THERE MUST BE A PAN HERE SOMEWHERE!
AI!
OH!


NOW YOU'VE MADE HIM RUN AWAY!
UGH!
OW!

WHAT CRIME IN MY PAST BROUGHT ME TO THIS?
TO BE IN THE CONSTANT COMPANY OF THE BRAINLESS?

MY FATE IS BOUND TO A MORON AND EVERYONE HE KNOWS IS A MORON
AND IT IS ALWAYS PO PO WHO SUFFERS FOR THEIR STUPIDITY GHOST, DRAGONS, VENGEFUL DOLLS
AND EVERY TURN OF BAD LUCK THEY BRING UPON--


THEMSELVES

THE CRETINS WERE RIGHT
THE CAVE IS GUARDED

WAY OF THE RAT

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Boon and his friends find themselves in an endless cavern filled with treasure and no way out. Their only hope of escape is if Old Mother can undo the spell that transported them there. And time is running out as Po Po has discovered the cavern's guardian.

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PENCILLER LUKE ROSS

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WISHING DOLLS
LOST TREASURE CAVES
MONSTROUS GUARDIANS
WHY MUST PO PO'S LOT BE ENTWINED WITH A MORON'S?

PO PO?
HE SEEMS FRIGHTENED
WELL, DON'T SCARE HIM AWAY AGAIN BOON
HE'S SMALL, BUT THERE'S MEAT ON HIM
IT'S NOT ME SCARING HIM
FOR!
SOMETHING OUT
THERE
"The unwary will always find bad fortune more often than good."
Wing Tei Sim

WHAT IS THIS BEAST?
I DID NOT THINK TO ASK ITS NAME!
WE RUN, JACK!
THERE IS NOWHERE TO RUN, YAN!
THEN WE PRAY THAT BOON IS A FILLING MEAL!
IT SPEAKS? WHAT DOES IT SAY?
IT SAYS IT IS HAPPY TO SEE US!
IDIOT!

IT IS NOT A CREATURE OF MAGIC!
I CAN HURT IT!
ONLY ENOUGH TO ANGER IT FURTHER
UNLESS I GET A STAFF!
I SAW A PIKE OR A SPEAR SOMEWHERE!
DISTRACT THE BEAST WHILE I SEARCH!
YOU DISTRACT THE BEAST WHILE I SEARCH!
MAKE HIM CHASE YOU!
EVERYONE WANTS TO SEE THE MONKEY GET EATEN!
OH!

HAVE IT YOUR WAY, THEN!
FIND ME A STAFF, PO PO!
UH?
GUNH!=
"YOU HAVE COME A LONG WAY FOR NOTHING, STRANGER."

BOON SAI HONG IS NOT *HERE* AND NO FORCE ON EARTH WILL *PRODUCE* HIM
BOON SAI HONG? *THIS* IS THE ONE WHO STOLE MY NAME?
OLD MOTHER THIS IS *POON FEI LHONG*
FROM ONE END OF THE EMPIRE TO THE OTHER I HEAR MY *NAME* SPOKEN OF TALES OF *WAR* AND *DRAGONS* AND *GHOSTS*.
I HAVE HAD NO PART IN *ANY* OF THESE EXPLOITS.
I LEARN THAT A MAN IN *ZHUMAR* USES MY NAME
THE STORIES ARE *TRUE* BUT IT IS *BOON* TO WHOM THEY HAPPENED
THE PEOPLE GOT *HIS* NAME WRONG THEY THOUGHT HE WAS *YOU*
IT'S COMICAL, NO?
I AM NOT LAUGHING

EXCUSE ME, PLEASE?
I AM WING TEI SU
IS THIS THE *HOME* OF BOON SAI HONG?
YOU SEEK HIM AS *WELL*?
DID HE ALSO STEAL FROM *YOU*?
ACTUALLY *YES*
WHEN I FIND HIM, I SHALL *INQUIRE* AFTER YOUR GOODS, TEI SU.
SUCH THIEVES MUST NOT BE *ALLOWED* TO THRIVE
NOT EVEN IN A CITY AS *FOUL* AS ZHUMAR
GOOD DAY TO YOU, GENTLE LADY

NO
TOO SHORT
TOO FLIMSY
PO PO!
AH

HERE
STOP YOUR WHINING AND FIGHT
VERY GOOD
KA!

HAI!
RRRRRRRR!
HEYYYYY -
-YA!

THE CREATURE IS MORE *POWERFUL* THAN YOU!
EVEN WITH THE RING'S GIFTS YOU WILL *TIRE!*
THANK YOU, PO PO
FOR ALL OF YOUR-
-ENCOURAGEMENT!

WE MUST FIND AN *ESCAPE* FROM HERE
JAO AND YAN HAVE LOOKED FOR *DAYS* AND NOT FOUND ONE
EXCUSE MY *PESSIMISM*

"...BUT YOUR FRIENDS WOULD HAVE TROUBLE FINDING THEIR LEFT HAND WITH THEIR RIGHT"
COME, YAN THESE STAIRS MUST LEAD TO FREEDOM
HOW CAN YOU BE CERTAIN, JAO?
THEY LEAD SOMEWHERE
WHAT IF IT'S WORSE THAN HERE?
HOW COULD IT BE WORSE?
THESE STAIRS COULD LEAD TO SOME MORE HORRIBLE HELL
YOU DO NOT WALK UPWARD TO HELL
WHO IS TO KNOW?
A CAVE FILLED WITH ALL OF THE TREASURE WE COULD EVER DREAM OF AND NO WAY TO BRING IT HOME
I CANNOT THINK OF A WORSE HELL THAN THIS FOR A THIEF
REMEMBER THAT WE COULD NOT THINK OF THIS PLACE
HM
IF WE SIT, WE ARE EATEN - IF WE CLIMB, WE FACE THE UNKNOWN
WHAT TO DO, YAN?
I CANNOT KNOW--

"IT IS A QUANDARY"
WHO WAS THAT?
POON FE. LHONG
HE SEEKS BOON
HE BEARS THE RING OF FISTS
IF HE SEEKS BOON, IT MAY BE FOR DIRE REASONS
SHE IS IN LOVE
WITH WHO, OLD MOTHER?
WITH BOON, STUPID
OH
WHY DO YOU HIDE, GRANDDAUGHTER?
I NEED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THAT MAN
THEN I SHALL LEARN ALL FOR STEALTH, A GHOST IS BEST

"ENOUGH OF THIS TALK OF BOON AND POON AND SILLY GIRLS"
WE HAVE WORK AHEAD OF US THERE IS MUCH TO DO BEFORE
I ONLY WISH THAT...
NO WISHES!
MRPH?
YOU FORGET MY WARNING! YOU FORGET THE DOLL!
ONE UNWITTING UTTERANCE AND YOU ARE DOOMED
THIS SIMPLE TOTEM HIDES A TERRIBLE POWER, TIGER
WE MUST BE WARY WE MUST WRITE A WISH THAT WILL BRING BOON HOME
WE MUST THINK OF EVERYTHING -- EVERY POSSIBILITY FOR DISASTER EVERY WORD THAT MAY BE TWISTED AGAINST US

"AND THEN PRAY THAT WE HAVE NOT LEFT THE DOLL AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MISCHIEF."
WHAT TO DO?
WHAT TO DO?
UH?
WHO?
OH!

WHERE ARE YOU =PANT= -RUNNING, BOON?
AWAY!
BOON!
A DOORWAY LIES AHEAD!
A DOOR
A BIG =PANT= DOOR
TO KEEP SOMEONE OUT?
OR SOMETHING =PANT= IN

THIS DOOR IS TO KEEP THE MONSTER INSIDE
NO HINGES NO LOCKS
IT IS BARRED FROM THE OTHER SIDE, THEN.
=gasp=
=gasp=
~IS THERE NO GAP ABOUT THE ~=gasp=~ FRAME?
IT IS SET FLUSH INTO THE GATEWAY
LOOK HERE
THE MONSTER HAS LOOSENED A PANEL
IT HAS CLAWED AT THROUGH
THIS PIECE HAS COME AWAY
NOT MUCH ROOM
I HAVE THE THINNEST ARM
CAN YOU TOUCH ANYTHING?
I FEEL NO BAR~OR LOCK~
~MUST BE~OUT OF REACH
YOU ARE NOT THE SMALLEST ONE HERE, BROTHER JAO

PO PO WI.. FIT THROUGH THE GAP
Um?
FINE ANOTHER MONKEY
HERE IS NO OTHER MONKEY
WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT S ON THE OTHER SIDE
AND YOU CAN FIND OUT
THE MONSTER WILL EAT YOU BIG SMOKE FIRST
AND WE EAT YOU IN THE END
HE TALKS TO THE MONKEY
BUT DOES THE MONKEY ANSWER?
PO PO WILL DO IT
HE WILL PASS THROUGH AND EITHER UNBAR THE DOOR OR FIND SOMEONE WHO WI..
HOW CAN YOU KNOW THAT?
BECAUSE I TRUST HIM

THAT'S IT, PO PO, JUST LOSE YOUR HEAD FOR NOW
SKREEEK!
HE WON'T FIT!
HE WILL #UNNH- FIT IF HE STOPS FIGHTING!
THERE!

PO PO IS *NOT* PLEASED
FOR *THAT*, I MAY NOT COME BACK UNTIL *AFTER* I'M CERTAIN THE MONSTER HAS EATEN YOU
CAN YOU *OPEN* THE DOOR PO PO?
NO THESE BARS ARE TOO *HEAVY*
I MUST FIND *HELP*
DO NOT FORGET, JS!
WHAT WOULD MAKE ME FORGET?
IDIOT

Lady Death: THE WILD HUNT PREVIEW INSIDE!

WAY OF THE RAT™

CrossGen

#22 APRIL 2004

Chuck Dixon
Rod Whigham
Tom Ryder
Chris Garcia

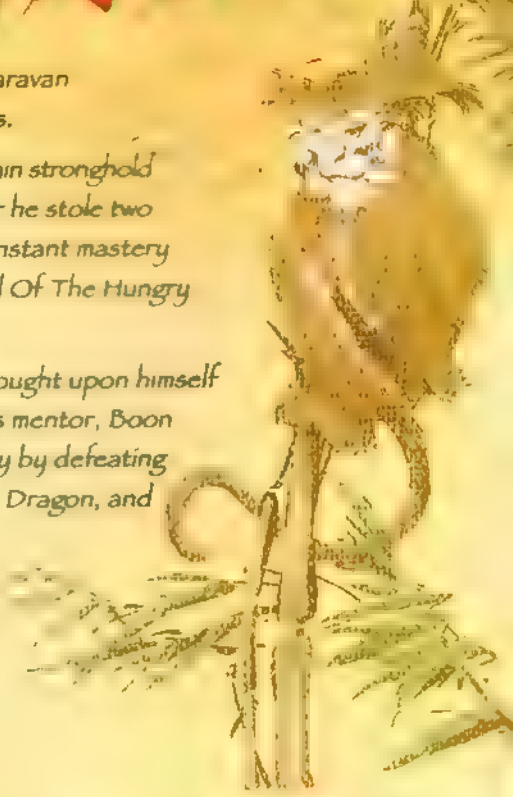
Previously In WAY OF THE RAT

The frontier city of Zhumar, last outpost of the [illegible] Empire, where civilization and barbarism clash. All caravan roads lead here. Every wild tribe covets its treasures.

Boon Sai Hong is a common thief who calls the mountain stronghold home. On one regrettable night in his criminal career he stole two artifacts: the Ring of Staffs, which gives its wearer instant mastery over any staffed weapon, and the Book Of The Hell Of The Hungry Dragons, a scroll which is an actual gateway to Hell.

His only guide through the misadventures he has brought upon himself is an enchanted monkey named Po Po. Guided by his mentor, Boon has gone from lowly scoundrel to the hero of the city by defeating in single combat the Great Bhuto Khan, an Emperor Dragon, and the evil spirit Kung Kung Yi.

Boon and his friends remain trapped inside a treasure cave with a vicious monster stalking their every move. Their only hope for escape is – Po Po?



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PENCILLER: ROD WHIGHAM

INKER: TOM RYDER

COLORIST: CHRIS GARCIA

LETTERER: DAVE LANPHEAR

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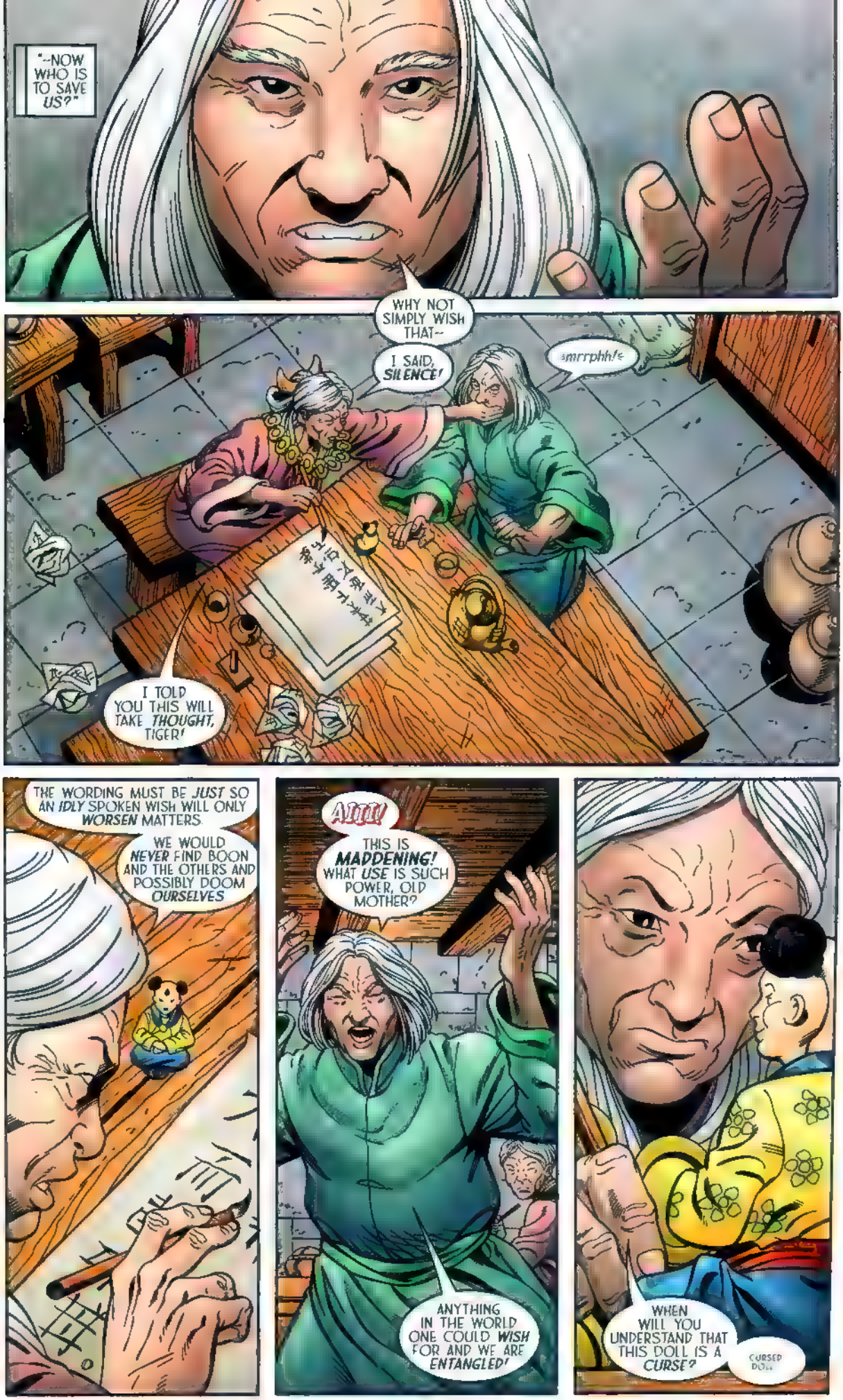
WAS IT *ME* WHO WISHED US INTO A BOTTOMLESS CAVERN?
NO, IT WAS THE *IDIOT* BOON!
BUT IT IS *PO PO* WHO MUST SAVE THEM
I SHOULD SAVE THEM FROM *THEMSELVES*
UH?

CATS?
I HATE CATS!
A man's true desires are a mystery even to himself.

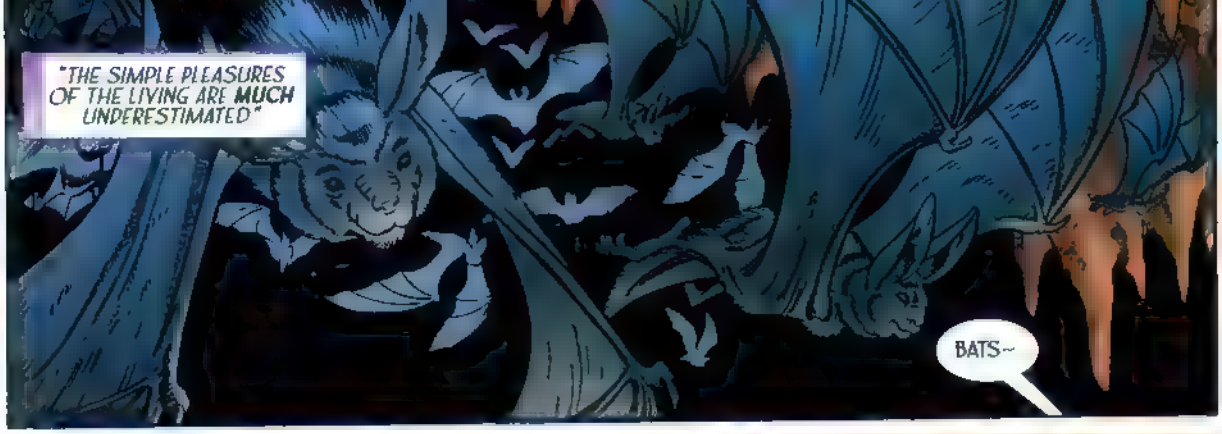
PO PO IS NO CAT'S DINNER!
Ooh
HOO!
HO!
WAH!
FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY EXISTENCE~
~I AM PLEASED TO BE A MONKEY

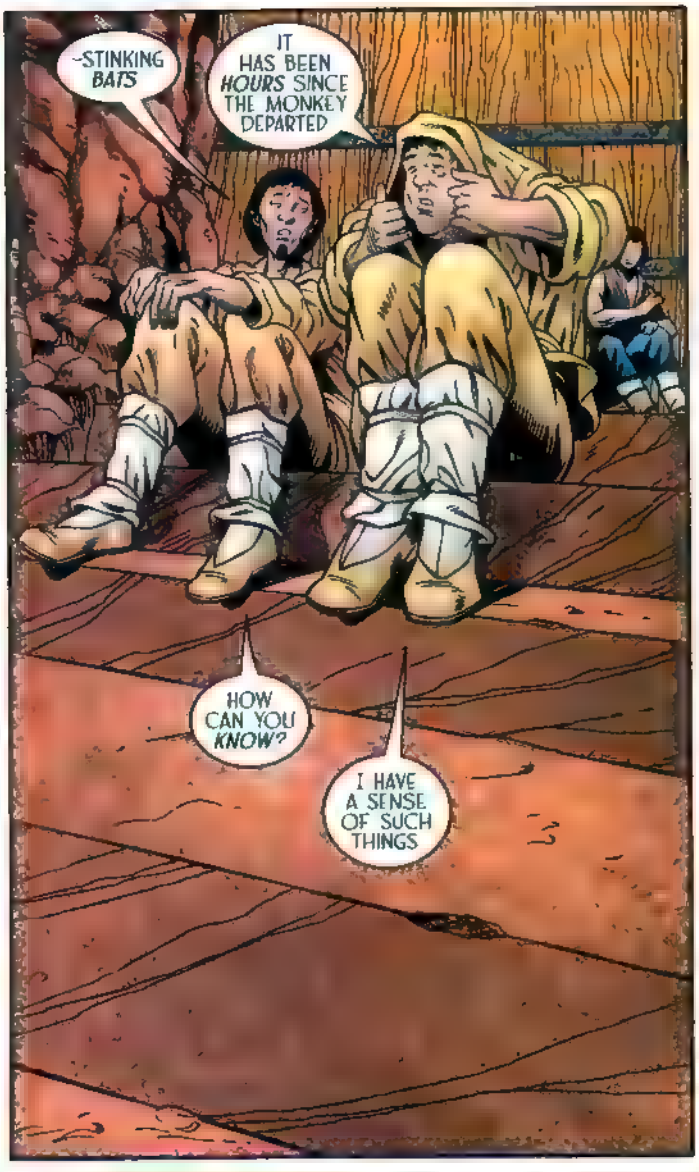
NOW WHAT TO DO?
PO PO IS LOST AND ALONE
WELL, NOT ENTIRELY ALONE
BE GONE! EAT SOMEONE ELSE!
"THERE ARE LARGER MEALS TO BE HAD!"
I SEE NOTHING
I HEARD ROARING, BOON
ONLY YOUR STOMACH, YAN
DOES YOUR MONKEY HAVE THE WIT TO RESCUE US?
THE WIT, JAO? YES
THE WILL? I AM NOT SO CERTAIN
OUR FATE RESTS WITH A MONKEY THEN
I TOLD YOU WE SHOULD HAVE EATEN HIM--


"--NOW WHO IS TO SAVE US?"
WHY NOT SIMPLY WISH THAT--
I SAID, SILENCE!
smrrphh!e
I TOLD YOU THIS WILL TAKE THOUGHT, TIGER!
THE WORDING MUST BE JUST SO AN IDLY SPOKEN WISH WILL ONLY WORSEN MATTERS.
WE WOULD NEVER FIND BOON AND THE OTHERS AND POSSIBLY DOOM OURSELVES
AHH!
THIS IS MADDENING! WHAT USE IS SUCH POWER, OLD MOTHER?
ANYTHING IN THE WORLD ONE COULD WISH FOR AND WE ARE ENTANGLED!
WHEN WILL YOU UNDERSTAND THAT THIS DOLL IS A CURSE?
CURSED DOLL

HAVE YOU NOTHING *ELSE* TO OCCUPY YOU?
IS PO PO *THAT* FASCINATING?
WELL I SUPPOSE I *AM*
WHAT *CALLS* THEM SO?
I HEAR ONLY A FAINT *CREAKING*—
—AS A *HINGE* MIGHT MAKE!
SO, YOU *ARE* PETS.
AND THERE *IS* AN EXIT

"NOW, HOW TO REACH IT?"
THE CITY OF ZHUMAR
GRANDDAUGHTER, YOU ARE YET AWAKE?
I WAS WAITING FOR YOU. WHAT NEWS OF THIS POON FEI LHONG?
IS THAT TEA?
I SO MISS THE COMFORT OF HOT TEA
GRANDFATHER--
Oh, THIS MAN YOU SEEK IS OF HUMBLE NEEDS. HE SLEEPS IN A POTTER'S SHOP WITH OTHER PEASANT WORKERS
YOU WILL LEAD ME THERE GRANDFATHER
IS THERE HONEY?
YES, GRANDFATHER
AH

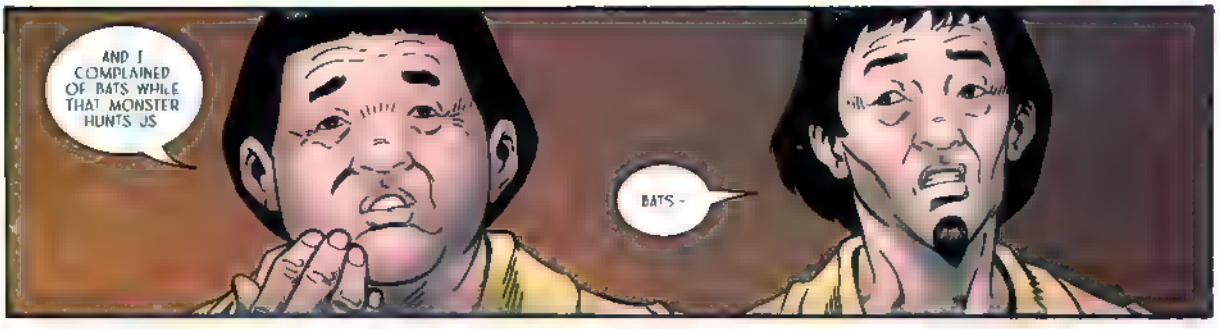

"THE SIMPLE PLEASURES OF THE LIVING ARE MUCH UNDERESTIMATED."
BATS~


~STINKING BATS
IT HAS BEEN HOURS SINCE THE MONKEY DEPARTED
HOW CAN YOU KNOW?
I HAVE A SENSE OF SUCH THINGS

QUIET, YOU TWO!

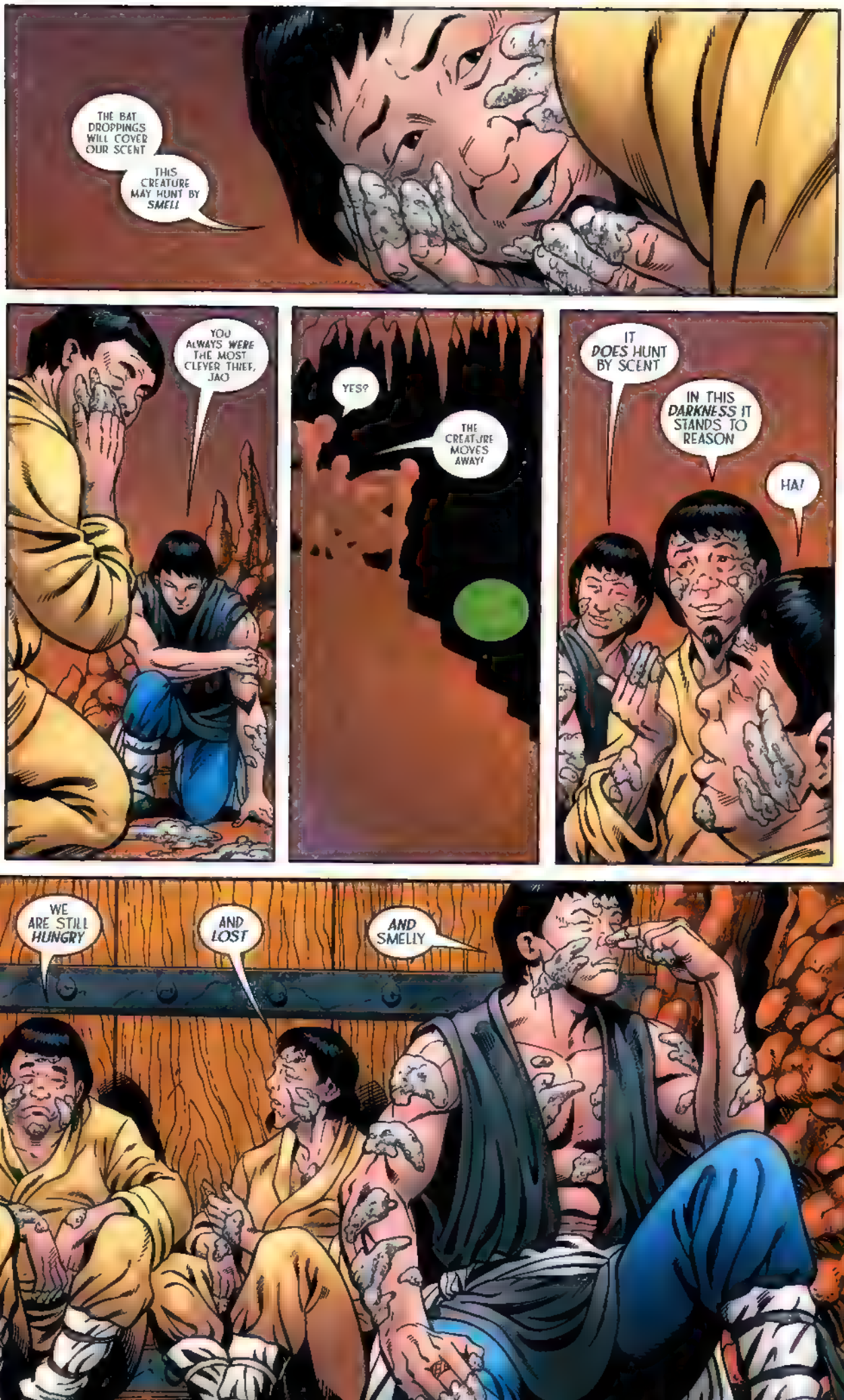
I HEAR~
~A VOICE

SHH!


AND I COMPLAINED OF BATS WHILE THAT MONSTER HUNTS US
BATS -

YOU HAVE SAVED US, YAN'
WHUH?

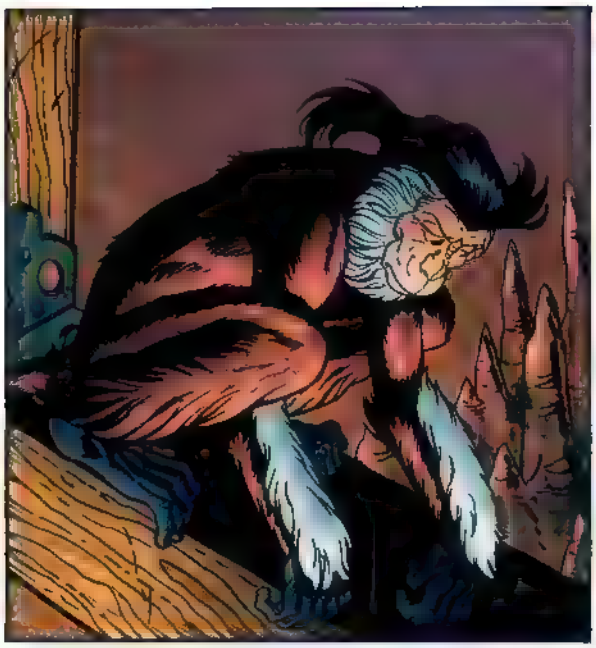
THE BATS THE BATS ARE ALWAYS HERE
UH?
OH.


THE BAT DROPPINGS WILL COVER OUR SCENT
THIS CREATURE MAY HUNT BY SMELL
YOU ALWAYS WERE THE MOST CLEVER THIEF, JAO
YES?
THE CREATURE MOVES AWAY!
IT DOES HUNT BY SCENT
IN THIS DARKNESS IT STANDS TO REASON
HA!
WE ARE STILL HUNGRY
AND LOST
AND SMELLY

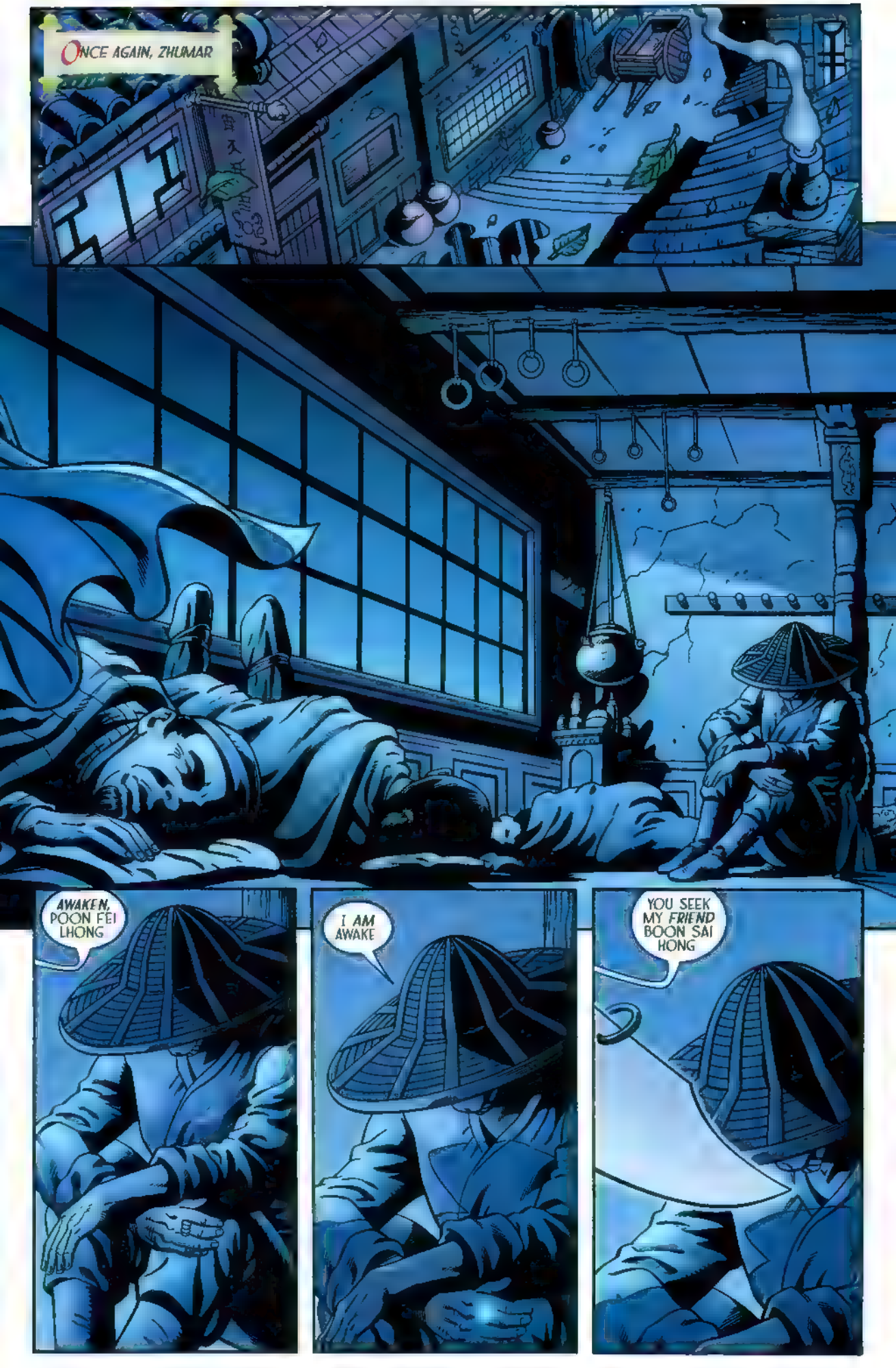
SO HUNGRY
SO THIRSTY

HOW OFTEN DOES A TIGER FILL ITS BELLY?
PO PO MUST BE READY I WILL HAVE ONLY A MOMENT

I MUST BE PREPARED TO MOVE THE INSTANT THE HATCH OPENS



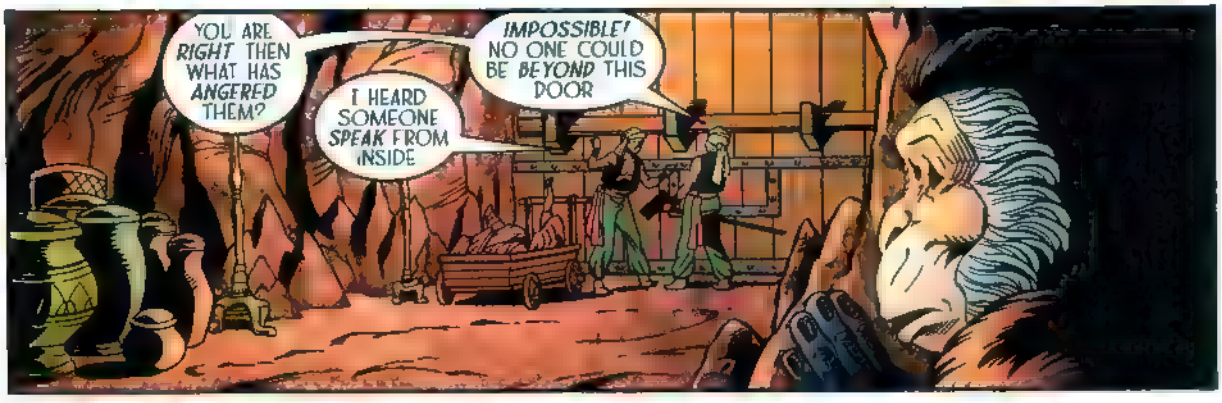
ZZZZZZZZ


ONCE AGAIN, ZHUMAR
AWAKEN, POON FEI LHONG
I AM AWAKE
YOU SEEK MY FRIEND BOON SAI HONG

OH
HE STEALS MY NAME AND THEN HIDES LIKE A COWARD
AND SLINE A WOMAN IN
THE RING OF BLADES
DO NOT

"--THOUGH I AM INTERESTED TO FIND OUT"
UH?
WHOA!
RUN, PO PO!
RUN!

BY THE PROPHET!
YOU FED THEM WITH ME THIS PAST EVENTIDE
THEY ARE ENRAGED! DID YOU NEGLECT TO FEED THEM?


YOU ARE RIGHT THEN WHAT HAS ANGERED THEM?
I HEARD SOMEONE SPEAK FROM INSIDE
IMPOSSIBLE! NO ONE COULD BE BEYOND THIS DOOR

AND ANY WHO WAS WOULD NOT SURVIVE LONG

A PALACE OF SOME KIND?
THIS IS NOT ZHUMAR
DEFINITELY NOT ZHUMAR
Eep

IDIOT
SNIFF SNIFF
I KNOW THIS ODOR
Oh, BOUNTIFUL DAY
A FEAST FOR PO PO

"AND ALL FOR ME"
I HEAR ROARING ONCE MORE
AGAIN, YOUR ROILING GUTS, YAN
I AM HUNGRY
NO MORE SO THAN BOON OR MYSELF
I DID NOT HAVE BREAKFAST BEFORE COMING HERE!
AND WHO BROUGHT US HERE, IGNORANT SLOTH?
IT WAS A MISTAKE!
YOU ARE A MISTAKE!
QUIET, BOTH OF YOU!
YOU WILL DRAW THE BEAST TO US AGAIN!
I AM HUNGRY ENOUGH TO EAT THE BEAST
WITH RICE
AND SWEE-
AND PEPPERS

AHHH--
DELIVERANCE
RRRRRRR!
EE!
HOOP!
HUNH!

ASWAD! DO NOT HARM THIS CREATURE!
HE HAS RUINED THE MORNING MEAL, EXCELENT SULTANA!
BUT HE IS CUTE
HE MUST HAVE ESCAPED FROM THE SULTAN'S MENAGERIE
HE IS MY WELCOME GUEST NOW, ASWAD
IS THAT CLEAR TO YOU?
AS YOU DESIRE, EXCELENT SULTANA
Ooo, 'OO'S A WIDDIE CUDDY MONKEY?
YOU SHALL BE MY PERSONAL COMPANION, SHAN'T YOU?
Oooooohhhh

Negation WAR PREVIEW INSIDE!

WAY OF THE RAT™

CrossGen
#23 MAY 2004

Chuck Dixon
Rod Whigham
Tom Ryder
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Previously In WAY OF THE RAT

The frontier city of Zhumar, last outpost of the Empire, where civilization and barbarism clash. All caravan roads lead here. Every wild tribe covets its treasures.

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His only guide through the misadventures he has brought upon himself is an enchanted monkey named Po Po. Guided by his mentor, Boon has gone from lowly scoundrel to the hero of the city by defeating in single combat the Great Bhuto Khan, an Emperor Dragon, and the evil spirit Kung Kung Yi.

While Boon and his friends are trapped in an endless treasure cave prowled by a monster, Po Po faces the even greater danger – of being spoiled to death!

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COLORIST CHRIS GARCIA

LETTERER DAVE LANPHEAR

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YOU MUST CEASE YOUR QUEST FOR BOON SAI HONG
WHAT IS HE TO YOU, WITCH?
A FRIEND NOTHING MORE

HE STOLE MY *NAME*

HE SOILS MY *REPUTATION*

IT S THE *CROWD* WHO CALLED HIM POON FEI LHONG

THEY MISTOOK HIS HERO SM FOR ACTS DONE BY *YOU*

FLATTERY?

YOU APPEAL TO MY *VANITY* TO STOP THIS COMBAT?

I APPEAL TO YOUR *HONOR*

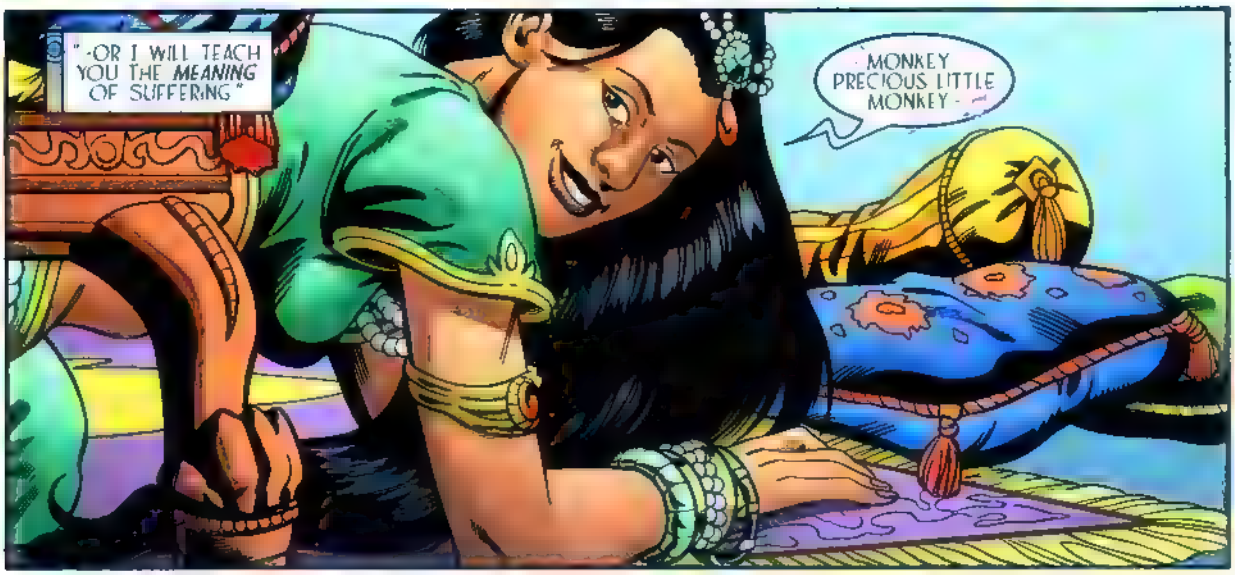
BECAUSE, AS *BEARERS* OF TWO OF THE SACRED RINGS

--IT IS *UNWORTHY* OF JS

"As any woman will assure you, all men are fools." Wing Tei Sun

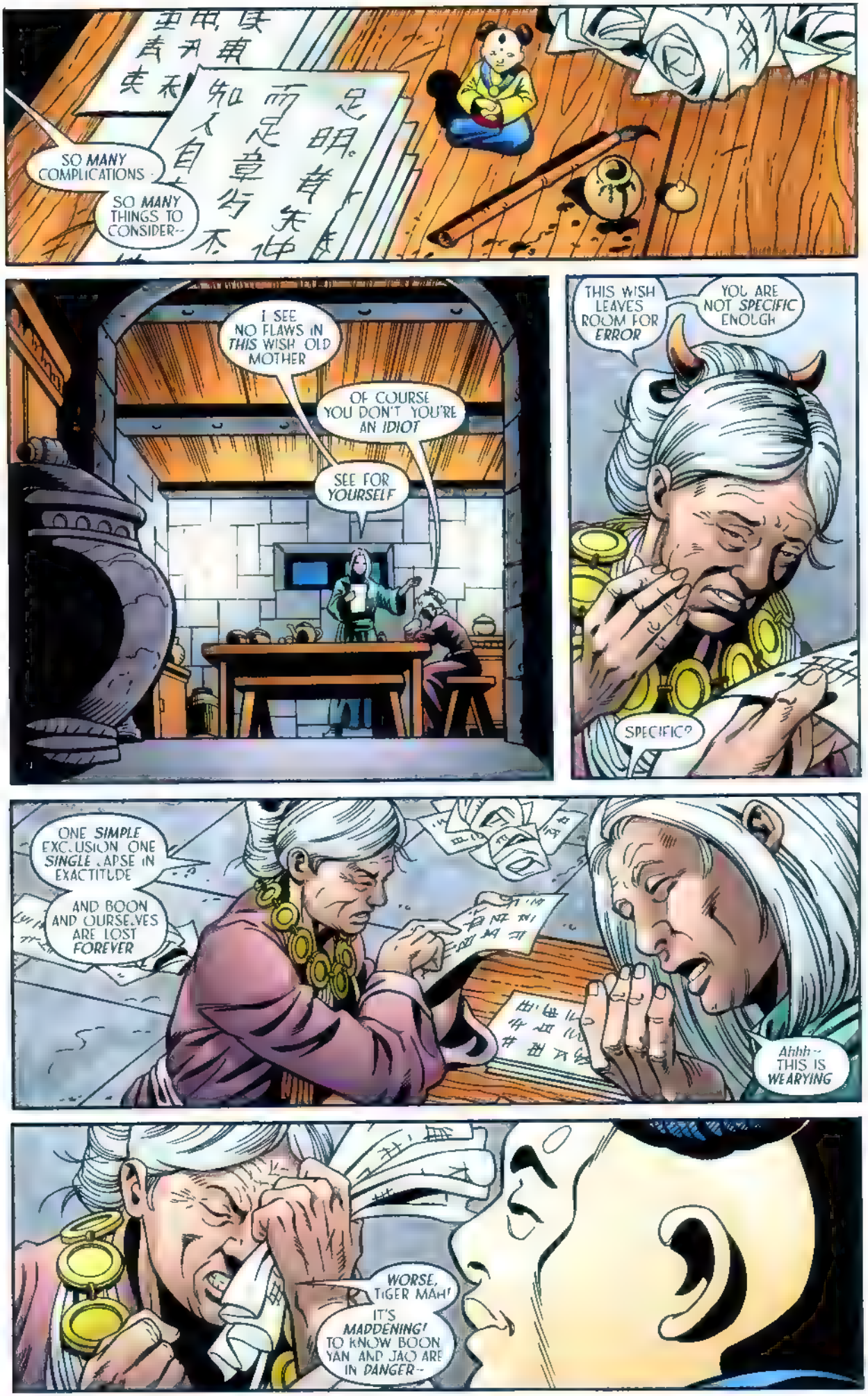
YOUR WORDS ARE *WISE*
I CARRY THE GIFT OF THE RING OF FISTS POORLY
BUT HOW TO *RESOLVE* THIS DIFFICULTY?
MY NAME IS NO LONGER MY *OWN* THE STORIES OF YOUR FRIEND HAVE *SUPPLANTED* MY OWN EXPLOITS
BUT YOU ARE *STILL* THE SAME MAN
AND YOUR *HONOR* IS INTACT
A NEW *NAME*, PERHAPS
I WONDER - IS IT POSSIBLE TO *MEET* THIS HERO OF ZHUMAR?
NOT AT THE MOMENT

"-BOON SAI HONG IS INDISPOSED"
BOON! WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
THE BEAST IS BELOW!
I WILL NOT STARVE LIKE A COWARD, JAO
THEN YOU WILL BE EATEN LIKE A HERO, BOON
WE RELY ON A MONKEY TO SAVE US
HOW CAN WE KNOW PO PO WILL RETURN?
IT WAS YOUR IDEA TO SEND HIM OUT OF THE CAVE
NOW I REALIZE THE FOLLY OF THAT NOTION
WE'LL FIND ANOTHER WAY OUT OF THIS CAVE
YOU'D BETTER BE DEAD, PO PO


"-OR I WILL TEACH YOU THE MEANING OF SUFFERING"
MONKEY PRECIOUS LITTLE MONKEY -

EE!
THERE YOU ARE, ITTY WIDDY PRECIOUS MONKEY--
LET MOMMY SPRAY YOU WITH ROSE WATER AND
YEEK!
GOT YOU!
YEE!
REE!
UH!
WHY DO YOU RUN AWAY, WIDDLE SWEETIE?
MOMMY ONLY WANTS TO--
LET GO OF ME, YOU INSUFFERABLE CHILD
BY WHAT PERVERSITY OF NATURE COULD YOU POSSIBLY BE MY "MOMMY?"

YOU
YOU TALK
FAR BETTER THAN YOU, I FEAR WITH YOUR "IDDY WIDDY" AND SUCH
I WOULD'VE SURMISED FROM YOUR SURROUNDINGS THAT YOU WERE A PRIVILEGED BRAT
BUT FROM YOUR USE OF LANGUAGE, I AM LEFT TO IMAGINE YOUR EDUCATION HAS BEEN WOEFULLY LACKING
AND THESE RIDICULOUS TRAPPINGS! IS NOT PO PO MAGNIFICENT ENOUGH IN HIS NATURAL STATE?
PO PO
A TALKING MONKEY
AM I A DOLL--A TOY TO FILL YOUR IDLE HOURS?
WAIT UNTIL FATHER SEES YOU
FATHER?

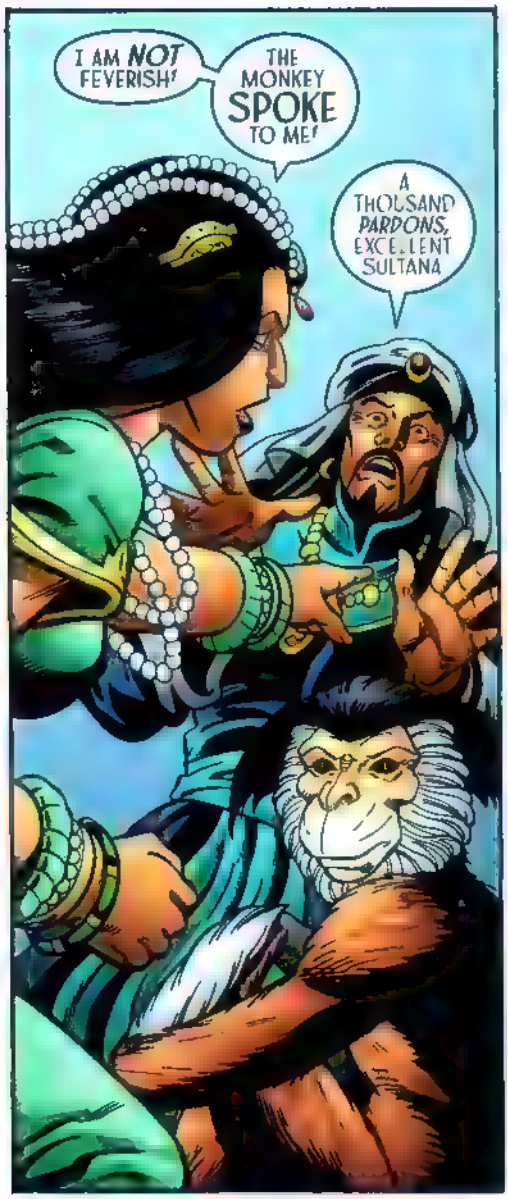

SO MANY COMPLICATIONS--
SO MANY THINGS TO CONSIDER--
I SEE NO FLAWS IN THIS WISH OLD MOTHER
OF COURSE YOU DON'T YOU'RE AN IDIOT
SEE FOR YOURSELF
THIS WISH LEAVES ROOM FOR ERROR
YOU ARE NOT SPECIFIC ENOUGH
SPECIFIC?
ONE SIMPLE EXC.USION ONE SINGLE .APSE IN EXACTITUDE
AND BOON AND OURSE.VES ARE LOST FOREVER
Ahhh-- THIS IS WEARYING
WORSE, TIGER MAH!
IT'S MADDENING! TO KNOW BOON YAN AND JAO ARE IN DANGER--

"--AND I AM POWERLESS TO HELP THEM!"
DO YOU SEE ANYTHING JAO?
NO DO YOU HEAR ANYTHING, YAN?
QUIET, BOTH OF YOU
THIS WILL SERVE AS A WEAPON
WITHOUT TS BLADE IT IS A STAFF
FIND YOURSELVES WEAPONS BROTHERS
WE WIN THIS FIGHT OR WE DIE
WE MAY DIE ANYWAY-- EVEN IF WE WIN
DON'T TALK FOOLISHNESS THERE IS NO WAY WE CAN DEFEAT THAT MONSTER
YOU ARE RIGHT, JAO

WE ARE NOT WARRIORS WE ARE THIEVES
WE ARE TRAPPED RATS AND EVEN TRAPPED RATS WILL FIGHT
DO YOU SENSE SOMETHING BOON?
SOMETHING BIG?
HUSH! I CANNOT THINK WITH ALL YOUR TALKING!
WE'RE FREE TO LOOK FOR ANOTHER WAY OUT OF HERE
I THINK MAYBE THE BEAST HAS GONE AWAY

YAAAH!
OOOH!
ATTACK THE BEAST, BROTHERS!
WE ARE MANY AND HE IS ONE!
WHAT DO WE DO?
LET BOON WEAKEN IT!
GOOD PLAN! VERY GOOD PLAN!

SPEAK, LITTLE MONKEY
SAY ANYTHING, PLEASE
YOU MAY EVEN TELL ME HOW STUPID I AM, AS BEFORE
YOU DO NOT NEED A MONKEY TO TELL YOU THAT YOU ARE ACTING FOOLISHLY, DEAR DAUGHTER
BUT HE SPOKE! HE TOLD ME HIS NAME IS PO PO!
PERHAPS THE SULTANA IS FEVERISH, MIGHTY ZULEMAN
PERHAPS, IBRAHIM


I AM NOT FEVERISH!
THE MONKEY SPOKE TO ME!
A THOUSAND PARDONS, EXCELLENT SULTANA

A THOUSAND THOUSANDS WOULD NOT BE ENOUGH!
THE MONKEY IS ENCHANTED AND I WILL PROVE IT!

YOU MADE ME LOOK A FOOL!
I COULD NOT SPEAK GIRL I HAVE A SECRET TO PROTECT
Hunh!

WHAT KIND OF SECRET?
MY MASTER IS TRAPPED IN A CAVE BENEATH THIS PALACE
I NEED HELP TO FREE HIM

YOUR MASTER?
IS HE A PRINCE?

YAN! JAO!
NOW IS THE TIME TO ATTACK!
BOON NEEDS US
HE IS LOST WITHOUT OUR HELP
THE BEAST IS LARGE
BUT WE ARE THREE
HIYAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!

HUNH!
KA!
UH!
UFF!
MY FRIENDS ARE THIEVES, NOT WARRIORS

BUT THEY HAVE *STOLEN* THE SECONDS I NEEDED!

HA!

WUNH!

Oh

BOON

YOU *KILLED* T

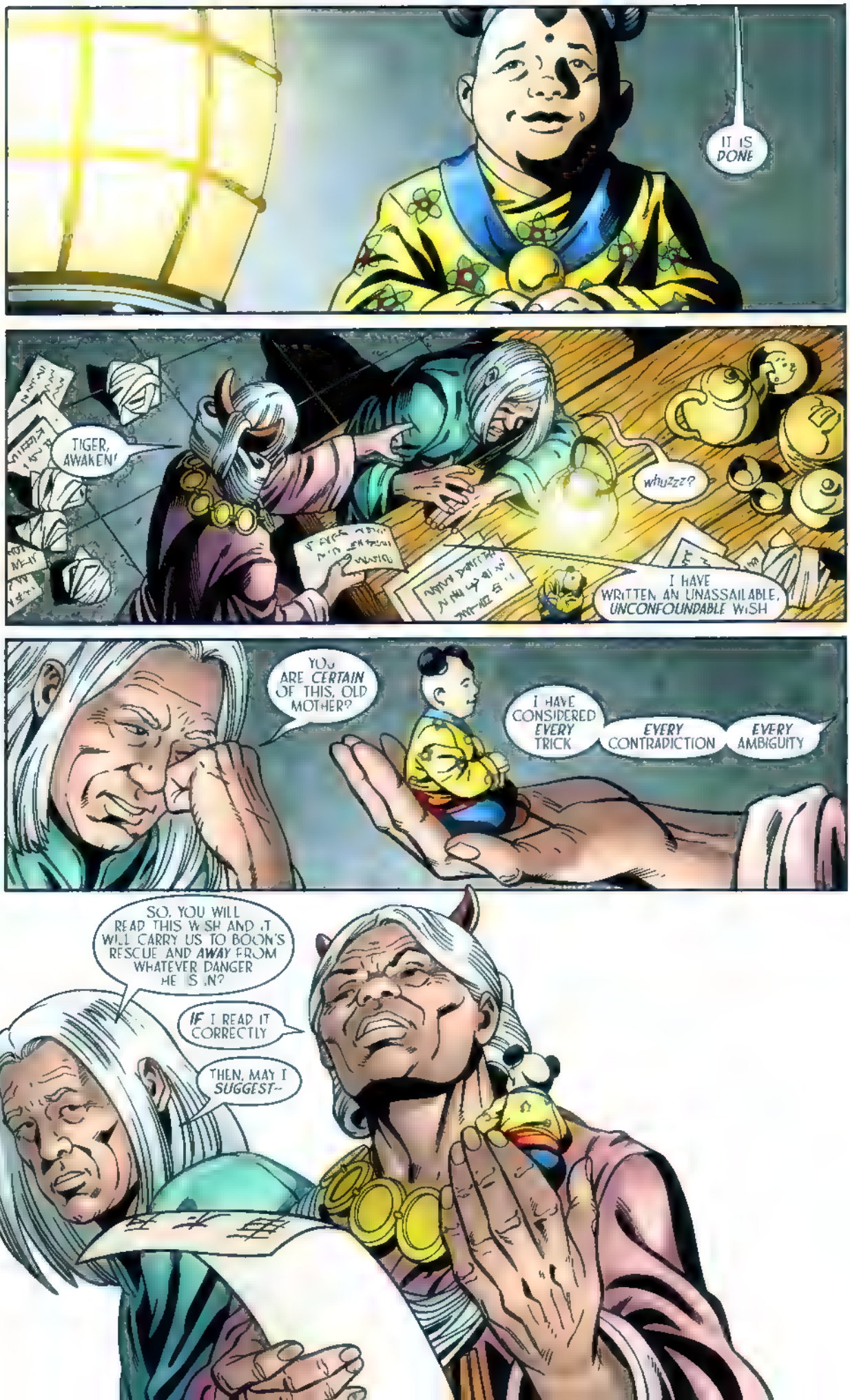
I HAVE CHANGED MY MIND I WILL NOT EAT THIS CREATURE
THERE IS NOT ENOUGH FISH SAUCE IN THE WORLD TO MAKE THAT PALATABLE
STOP THINKING OF YOUR STOMACHS FOR ONCE
WE STILL HAVE TO FIND A WAY FROM THIS CAVE
ARRRROOOGH!

WHAT WAS THAT HOWL?
A DEATH CRY PERHAPS
IT'S DEAD THAT'S ALL I NEED TO KNOW

ALL THAT YOU NEED TO KNOW IS -
-THERE'S A PRINCE WHO NEEDS OUR HELP
HE'S TRAPPED IN THE CAVES UNDER THE PALACE
AND YOU, MY LOYAL EUNUCHS, ARE GOING TO HELP ME RESCUE HIM
BUT THERE ARE THE TIGERS
AND THE GUARDIAN DJINNS
AND THE SULTAN HAS FORBIDDEN ANY BUT HE TO ENTER THE CAVES
YOU ARE MY EUNUCHS!
YOU WILL FOLLOW MY COMMANDS!
YES, YOUR MOST WONDEROUS SULTANA!

WHO TOLD YOU OF THIS PRINCE, O MARVELOUS SULTANA?
THAT DOES NOT MATTER
BUT I AM CERTAIN HE IS IN DANGER
WE CANNOT LET MERE TIGERS OR DJINNS DELAY US!
HE HAS BEEN TRAPPED FOR DAYS AND IS SURELY NEAR DEATH!
ONE OF THOSE KEYS MUST FIT THE LOCK!
I AM TRYING, MY ADORED SULTANA!
TRY HARDER!

THE PRINCE AWAITS US!


IT IS DONE
TIGER, AWAKEN!
whuzzz?
I HAVE WRITTEN AN UNASSAILABLE, UNCONFOUNDABLE WISH
YOU ARE CERTAIN OF THIS, OLD MOTHER?
I HAVE CONSIDERED EVERY TRICK
EVERY CONTRADICTION
EVERY AMBIGUITY
SO, YOU WILL READ THIS WISH AND IT WILL CARRY US TO BOON'S RESCUE AND AWAY FROM WHATEVER DANGER HE IS IN?
IF I READ IT CORRECTLY
THEN, MAY I SUGGEST--

"THAT YOU TAKE ALL THE TIME YOU NEED"

WAY OF THE RAT
CrossGen
#24 JUNE 2004
Chuck Dixon
Rod Whigham
Tom Ryder
Wil Quintana
Andrew Crossley

JH?
IT IS HIM!
THE WARRIOR WHO ASSAULTED US!
NO
I AM LEAVING ZHUMAR
OH?
DID YOU FIND THE MAN WHO STOLE YOUR NAME?
I DID NOT
CALL ME NUNG BAO

NUNG BAO?
IT MEANS "NO NAME."
"What does not end in glory or ignominy is forgotten."
Wing Tei Sun

I WISH~
~WITHOUT INJURY OR DEATH VISITED UPON TIGER MAH OR MYSELF~ ~FOR THE FOLLOWING EVENTS TO OCCUR *IN* THE ORDER LISTED~
~WITH *NO* DEVIATIONS FROM MY WORDS OR INTENTIONS OR MALICIOUS TWISTS ON THE *MEANING* OF THOSE WORDS~
~THAT TIGER MAH AND I TRAVEL TO THE PLACE THAT BOON SAI HONG, YAN SIANG, AND WU JAO HAVE GONE TO *AND*~

"-FIND THEM SAFE AND ALIVE AND-"
WHAT DO WE DO, BOON?
THEY ARE SO MANY!
LOST AND STARVING IN AN ENDLESS CAVE FILLED WITH HUNGRY MONSTERS
MY PLAN OF ACTION IS TO--

RUN!
"I GROW IMPATIENT WITH YOU, ABBAD"

I AM *TRYING*, EXCELLENT PRINCESS.
BUT I HAVE NEVER HAD CAUSE TO *OPEN* THIS ROOM
AND SHOULD I OPEN IT I WILL ONLY FREE THE *TIGERS* WITHIN--
--THE TIGERS THAT *GUARD* THE GATE TO THE TREASURE CAVE
WE *MUST* RESCUE THE PRINCE TRAPPED WITHIN
BUT IF THE TIGERS *EAT* US
WE WILL NOT BE *ALIVE* TO RESCUE ANYONE--
--UNLESS WE DRAW THE TIGERS *AWAY*--
--BY SENDING THE *MONKEY* IN FIRST
EH?

—AND THAT THE WISHING DOLL COME WITH US TO THE PLACE THAT BOON, YAN AND JAO HAVE TRAVELED TO AND THAT WE FIND THEM WITHOUT DIFFICULTY—
—AND THAT TIGER MAH BE ALLOWED TO MAKE A WISH RETURNING ALL OF US TO THIS PLACE AND TIME IN ZHUMAR WITH ALL OF OUR LIMBS INTACT
—AS WELL AS OUR SANITY AND OUR HEALTH AND WITHOUT TAKING US TO A PLACE THAT IS ABLAZE OR IMMERSED IN DEEP WATERS
—OR UPON AN INCLEMENT PRECIPICE OR A FIELD OF BATTLE OR QUICKSAND OR EARTHQUAKE OR PLAGUE OR

HOW CAN WE ESCAPE?
PERHAPS FIND A HOLE TOO SMALL FOR THEM TO REACH US!
AND STARVE TO DEATH WHILE THEY WAIT OUTSIDE?
BOON!
I TIRE OF RUNNING
DO YOU TIRE OF RUNNING YAN?
=PANT= =PANT=
I FEEL I CAN RUN A BIT FURTHER!
=PANT= =PANT=
THE PATH IS TOO NARROW?
THERE IS NO WAY AROUND ME?
THEN SEND YOUR MOST COURAGEOUS

YOUR BRAVEST
—AND UGLIEST!
I AM A THIEF AND NOT A WARRIOR—
—BUT EVEN A RAT FIGHTS WHEN CORNERED

"EVEN A COWARD TURNS TO A DRAGON WHEN HOPE IS GONE."
I AM SO SMALL!
THERE ARE FAT MEN TO EAT!
CAN YOU NOT SEE THEM?
QUICKLY NOW THE TIGERS WILL SOON HAVE OUR SCENT
=UNNH!=
AS YOU DESIRE, EXCELLENT PRINCESS!
NOW TO FIND THE PRINCE AND SAVE HIM
SAVE HIM FROM WHAT?
I HAVE HEARD ONLY STORIES--

"--OF HORRORS WITHIN THESE CAVES TO DRIVE A MAN MAD"
HO!
STUPID CATS!
THE DOOR IS OPEN!
I MUST FIND BOON!

CERTAINLY HE IS A FOOL
"BUT A FOOL I CAN *TOLERATE!*"
MOVE *CAREFULLY*, MONSTER
--OR JOIN YOUR *BROTHER* IN THE PIT!

BOON WE *TOO* ARE TIRED OF RUNNING!
AND THE BRIDGE LEADS *ONLY* TO A BLIND CAVERN!
I WILL HANDLE THE BEASTS!
FIND ANOTHER PATH *AWAY* FROM THEM!

UNNH!
GRRRRR!
UH?
THAT MUST BE THE PRINCE!
HE IS DRESSED IN TATTERS, EXCELLENT PRINCESS!
HE IS HANDSOME! A HANDSOME PRINCE!
HA!
A STAFF!

HUNH!
HOO!
WA!
UH!

WE MUST SAVE THE PRINCE!
STOP!
DON'T MAKE US GO DOWN THERE!
EXCELLENT PRINCESS, IT IS NOT SAFE!
BOON!
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, PO PO?
PO PO?
THIS IS A PLACE OF HORRORS, MY FRIEND!
FRIEND?
I MEANT, "IDIOT"
GET OFF OF ME! YOU SMELL OF JASMINE!
IT WAS HER!
OH

MERCIFUL PROPHET
GOD OF MY FATHERS -
THIS MAY BE THE *END*, PO PO
I DID NOT *FORESEE* THIS
PO PO HAS *FAILED*

--OR FLAMES OR SANDSTORM OR CONSUMING INSECTS OR FISH OR DANGERS FROM ANY ANIMAL OF THE LAND, SEA, OR SKY AS YET UNKNOWN TO US--
--OR SUFFOCATING VAPORS OR BURNING CONCOCTIONS OF ANY KIND OR MOLTEN ROCK FROM AN ERUPTING VOLCANO OR ANY WEAPONS OF MAN WIELDED IN ANGER OR BY CHANCE--
--AND ALLOW US TO RETURN TO THIS VERY ROOM INSTANTANEOUSLY WITH ALL OF OUR COMPANY INTACT

IT IS BOON!
AND TIGERS! AND MONSTERS!
OLD MOTHER?
NO TIME! TIGER, TAKE THE DOLL AND SAY ONLY WHAT I TOLD YOU!
YUH-YUH- YES, OLD MOTHER!
I WISH WE WERE BACK IN ZHUMAR WITH BOON, HIS MONKEY, YAN, JAO, OLD MOTHER, MYSELF AND ALL OUR COMPANY!

ZHUMAR.
YOU SAVED US, OLD MOTHER!
AND THAT WICKED LITTLE DOLL REMAINED BEHIND!
I WOULD PREFER IT STAYED IN MY SAFE-KEEPING.
BUT IT IS BETTER AWAY FROM THESE FOOLS.
OLD MOTHER, YOU ARE A HERO!
I LOVE YOU!
I OWE YOU MY LIFE!
AAAH! RELEASE ME! ENOUGH!
EXCUSE ME~
~BUT WHAT PLACE IS THIS?

IS THIS THE LAND OF YOUR *BIRTH*, MY PRINCE?
PRINCE?
I CANNOT WAIT TO BE TAKEN TO YOUR *PALACE!*
PALACE?
YOU *DELIVERED* ME FROM CERTAIN DOOM, MY PRINCE!
MMMMMMM...
ACTUALLY, IT WAS--
BOON! I HEARD YOUR *VOICE!*
YOU HAVE--
--RETURNED.

TEI SU!
IT NEVER ENDS!